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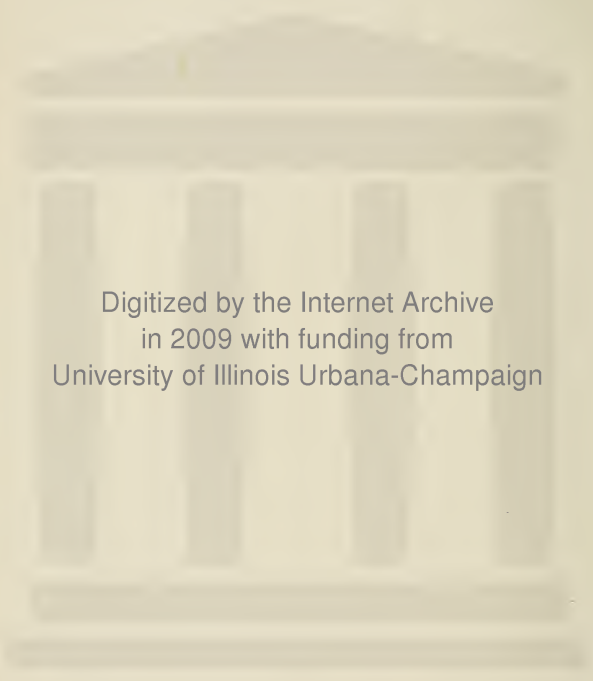
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JUDITH WYNNE,

A Novel.

BY

C. L. PIRKIS,

AUTHOR OF "DI FAWCETT," "A VERY OPAL," &C., &C.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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TO

NORAH MARGUERITE CHANDOS CECIL

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NUTFIELD, 1884.

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TWO MEN AND A MAID.

JUDITH WYNNE.

VOLUME III.

CHAPTER I.

“LL things come to him who waits,” said someone once, and Judith one day proved the truth of the saying. The opportunity for which she had watched, and waited, and longed suddenly and unexpectedly presented itself, and, quick as any wild bird darting on its prey, she seized it.

It happened in this wise. The day had been rough and blustering as days towards the end of October are apt to be; sunshine had come in fitful gleams; heavy gusts of wind had by turns dashed hail or rain against the panes. Towards evening, however, the wind fell, the sky cleared, and

the hunter's moon rose high and bright over the mountains.

Mrs. Reece had gone straight to her room after dinner, saying she was tired and would have her coffee upstairs; Delphine making the drawing-room unendurable to Judith by incessant and highly melodramatic carolling, she wrapped a warm, thick shawl round her and went out into the garden. Finding Falstaff snuffing about the lawn, it occurred to her how much the old dog would enjoy a ramble in the fields beyond, and, without a thought for the lateness of the hour, she forthwith slipped out at a side gate.

The fields lay steeped in the pure silver light of the moon; beyond, the mountains loomed darkly out of the shadowy clouds. Falstaff went bounding hither and thither, delighted at his unlooked-for treat, giving now and again short, sharp, enquiring barks as he scented here a mole, there a rabbit. Judith, drawing her shawl tightly around her, leaned idly against a rough-barked elm, thinking her own thoughts.

There came the sound of footsteps drawing near—nearer.

“One of those dreadful women,” she thought to herself; “inside or outside the house it is all one—there is no peace for them.”

No such thing. Not Delphine nor Olivette, had they tied weights to their ankles, could have attained so majestic a tread as this. It was a man’s, not a doubt, and there was he coming hurriedly down the gravel path as though he had a mission on hand. It was Wolf, and his mission was to search for Judith and bring her back to the house.

Judith started as he came up to her, but he gave her no time for exclamation.

“Child, what is this?” he cried. “What are you doing out here at this time of night? I was standing at my study window, and saw you go out by the side gate. Come in at once, or you’ll be catching your death of cold.”

Judith looked up at him drearily enough. Something in his voice at this moment re-

called the pleading earnestness with which, as she had wept her heart out over Uncle Pierre's letter, he had cried : " Child, child, you must not give way like this. I cannot — cannot bear it ! "

Ah, how far away that day seemed now ! Then she had had a something of hope in her heart for herself, for him. Now scarce a ghost of it remained.

And no wonder !

Possibly something of her thoughts showed in her face, as she remained silently leaning against the tree, making no effort to do his bidding, for he suddenly laid his hand upon her shoulder, and, looking right down into her white, tired face, exclaimed :

" Child, child, are you ill ? Great Heavens ! what can have happened to change you in this way ? Can this be the Judith who came to the house little more than a year ago to be taken care of and made happy ? "

The words seemed, as it were, startled out of him. For one brief moment the

bonds of restraint he had laid upon himself were loosened.

Judith answered his look with the clearest and truest that human eyes could give.

“No,” she said, in low, distinct tones, “I am not the same Judith who came to your house a little more than a year ago, and nothing will ever make me the same again.”

“Child, child, you don’t know what you are saying!” he cried, vehemently; “you will go from here to another and brighter life, and all this will be to you as though it had never been. It will pass out of your mind utterly—it must, it will—and you will lead the pure and happy life you deserve to lead. I say it must, it will be so!”

It seemed as though he reiterated the words himself to convince himself.

“So, then, I am shallow-hearted as well as of no use to my fellow-creatures?”

He caught at her words angrily.

“Use, use!” he repeated. “Why are you always wishing to be of use? It seems the one cry of your life. Would

you have those who are sinking deep and deeper into the mire catch hold of your little hand to help them out simply because you are good enough to stretch it towards them?"

"I would. And so long as I have life and breath it will remain outstretched."

It was said without variation of voice, in the same low, distinct tones as before, she looking up into his face, he down into hers.

The night breeze swept by; a few yellow leaves fell from the old elm on Judith's thick shawl; the moon looked down upon them, quiet-eyed. She was shining down on many a pair of disconsolate lovers, no doubt—on many a sorrow-stricken, weary soul beside—but nowhere, by hillside or shady avenue, did her pure pale rays light up a face more white and haggard than Judith's, upturned to meet Wolf's, more fiercely forlorn than Wolf's, down-looking to meet Judith's.

But as he looked and looked, the fierceness died utterly out of his face, and only the forlornness remained. Once he opened

his lips as though about to speak, then closed them resolutely; his eyes drooped before hers; he turned from her abruptly; made a few hasty strides up and down the moonlit field; came back to her side with face blank, calm, passionless as any masked mummer's might be.

“Come, Judith,” he said quietly, “come in at once; we will talk no more of these things. I have succeeded in quieting—what shall we call it?—my soul, my nerves, or that inherited instinct we are pleased to designate conscience; I beg of you not to disturb it, and wrench from me the only chance of peace and quiet I may get to the end of my life. Let me alone, child; it is all I ask of you now—let me alone!”

He had drawn her arm through his while he was speaking, and was leading her now at a somewhat rapid pace towards the house.

Judith felt as though her last opportunity were slipping away from her. Speak now, or never, she must.

“I would wrench from you every chance of peace and quiet,” she said, her voice scarcely above a whisper, “till you get the only peace that is real and lasting—the peace that comes from doing right.”

He had swung back the iron gate for her to enter. They were now standing in the wide gravel-path that led straight up to the house. It lay steeped in moonlight like the fields outside, tessellated here and there with the shifting shadows of laurel and arbutus leaflets.

He paused with his hand on the gate.

“What is right?” he asked dreamily, absently. Something over eighteen hundred years ago Pilate once asked a similar question, and He, who held the secrets of life in His hand, gave him no answer. Judith showed less reticence.

Words rushed to her lips.

“What is right?” she repeated, her voice ringing out clear and strong. “What is light—what is colour? Not I, nor fifty others might be able to tell you what are the elements of either—what makes each

what it is. Yet we know light when we see it, we know colour when we see it. We do not need to be told, this is night, this is morning; this is blue, this is red."

"Ah, you misunderstood my question," said Wolf in the same dreamy, self-absorbed tone. "I did not ask by what faculty in our nature we discern what is right; mine was a practical, not a psychological question. I meant to ask, what is the criterion of a moral act? What, in fact, is the moral standard? What circumstance, if I may so put it, decides an action to be right, and not wrong?"

Judith stared at him for a moment blankly. Had he in very truth so beclouded his moral sense that he was obliged to go to another to be guided in his discernment of good or evil; or was this a genuine, unassumed effort to sift right from wrong, lies from truth?

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked, her brain going round, her eyes wide open, "that you actually do not know truth or justice from falsehood and dishonesty?"

His face was turned from her, so that she could not see it. He brought out his words in the same slow, faraway tone as before.

“Truth! justice!” he repeated; “what are they, after all, but means to an end, and that end, men’s happiness? They are not the end themselves. Now, it seems to me, if I can reach that end by a shorter road I am justified in taking it—yes, amply justified.”

Judith’s heart went beating harder and faster. Was not this mere sophistry? Was it—could it by any possibility be the honest utterance of an honest heart?

She tried to keep the sound of tears out of her voice as she asked a question in return:

“Would you for one instant weigh the happiness of a lifetime against the evil-doing of an hour? Would you weigh truth and justice against a lifetime of sorrow and self-denial?”

They were walking along the gravel-path now, towards the house. He, still

keeping his face turned from her, continued in the same slow, dreamy tones :

“The infliction of pain and the surrender of pleasure can only be justified by being the means of procuring a greater amount of happiness than was lost. Now, if I, by a certain course of action, can give to a larger number of persons a greater amount of happiness than they before possessed, I say, let that course of action be painful to me or pleasant, I am perfectly justified in taking it.”

Judith stood still in the middle of the moonlit path. She laid her hand upon his arm ; look at her he must and should.

“Tell me,” she said in a low, tremulous voice, “when you talk of making the happiness of other persons, do you mean good persons or evil persons ? For remember, what means pleasure and comfort to the one, means anguish and heart-ache to the other.”

He turned and faced her in the moonlight ; he could not help it, for she stood right athwart his path. Surely never

living man before wore so troubled and forlorn a look.

“Ah, now you bring us back to our starting-point,” he said. “Who are the good persons, who are the evil? What is good—what is evil?”

Judith struck her hands together passionately with a bitter cry.

“Is this night or is this morning? Is the light in which we are stepping now rosy and golden, or is it pure pale white?” she asked vehemently.

The troubled look did not leave his face, though a ghost of a smile—a wan, wintry sort of thing—seemed to flit over it as he answered:

“What if I am colour-blind, Judith, without perception of the difference there is between rosy-yellow and pure pale white?”

“Then yours would be a self-made colour-blindness, for you are not one of those who were born blind,” she answered in the same vehement tone as before; “only when the time comes, and Christ

passes by, do not sit by the wayside crying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!' for He will not hear you—I say, He will not—will not hear you."

His troubled eyes met her eager, passionate gaze.

"I am not likely to do that; no, whatever else I do I shall not do that;" and there was that in his voice which told her he meant what he said.

They had reached the terrace now. There came the sound of a window opening overhead, and Delphine's soft voice followed immediately.

"My Wolf," she said caressingly, "I want some sweet-scented flowers to put under my pillow. See, I will drop you my handkerchief; you can fill it with something fragrant, and send it up to me. Ah, Miss Judith is there! You have been having a moonlight walk. Is it not sweet of me not to be jealous? But I know I can trust my Wolf!"

Judith made no reply. She felt suffocating, as though even the power of

drawing her breath were being denied her.

She somehow made her way into the house, groping for each step, for her tears were blinding her.

Once in her own room she flung herself on the floor, wringing her hands in her despair. Why, this was worst of all! She had absolutely thrown away her last chance! She had meant to plead, entreat, warn, beseech; instead she had argued, dogmatised, denounced. Heaven help them! How would it all end now?



CHAPTER II.

WINTER set in early that year, and brought with it a terrible return of rheumatism to poor Mrs. Reece. Stairs became an impossibility to her; she was almost confined to a big easy-chair in her own room with the worthy but somewhat archaic doctor from Llanrhaiadr (everything at Llanrhaiadr was worthy and archaic) in daily attendance.

Wolf, Delphine, and Judith made but a sorry trio downstairs. They ate their meals almost in silence, and separated so soon as they were at an end. If only little Bertie had been allowed to take his place with them at table, his childish prattle might in some sort have lightened the dreary monotony. But no; he was strictly

confined to his own quarters, emerging thence only for his morning walk with Olivette, his afternoon drive with Delphine.

Judith spent as much of her time as possible upstairs with Mrs. Reece, declining any and every friendly overture on Delphine's part with a frigid persistence that was unmistakable. Delphine, however, never seemed to feel herself snubbed. She would shrug her shoulders, lift her eyebrows, and repeat her little friendlinesses on every possible occasion. As for Wolf, he had once more drawn a line of demarcation between Judith and himself, which neither he nor she showed the slightest inclination to step over. Save at meals they never met; and when on one or two occasions Delphine was absent in London for a few days, he sent each time a polite message to Judith by the old butler, requesting her not to wait luncheon or dinner for him, as pressure of business compelled him to spend the day in his study.

These visits of Delphine to London increased in frequency as the winter set in. Judith could not say why or wherefore, but somehow in her own thoughts she connected them with the sailor-like individual who had manifested such a surprising interest in Delphine's matrimonial arrangements. Yet Delphine never failed to give an ostensible and very plausible reason for each one of her sudden flights. Sometimes she would appear at the breakfast-table saying :

“Bertie has absolutely nothing to wear. I must run up to London and get him a few things ;” and on her return to Plas-y-Coed, Bertie never failed to shine out brilliantly in renewed velvets or satins. Or on another occasion it would be : “My Wolf, I want another pair of ponies ; those creatures of yours have hides, not skins, they will go only when they please, and as they please. Now, I want two thoroughbreds, all fire, all life, all go. There is a sale on at Tattersall's. I must go and see if I can get what I want there.”

And this visit to London was followed in due course by the arrival of a pair of small-footed, straight-limbed roans, with fiery eyes and a bright dash of red about the mane and tail.

Judith, while in a measure rejoicing in the quietude the household gained during Delphine's brief absences, could not help a secret feeling of dread as to what they might bring in their train. By this time she had learned to distrust every look of Delphine's, every word she uttered, and, could she have read her thoughts, she would have distrusted them also, feeling sure there would be an under-current even there which would run counter to the upper.

Mrs. Reece, growing irritable and inquisitive, after the manner of elderly persons confined through ill-health to a few square feet of boards, put many questions to Judith about Delphine's repeated journeys.

"Surely she must have friends in London by this time," surmised the old lady, "if she hadn't when she first came. Does she go to an hotel, I wonder, or what can she do

with herself careering about all alone? And do you think, my dear," this very earnestly, "that Wolf pays her expenses, and gives her money for all the extravagances she brings back with her? Now those ponies; I should like particularly to know about them. Are they Wolf's or are they this young lady's?—that's what I should like to know."

Judith confessed herself unable to give the required information. Mrs. Reece went off on another tack.

"Well now, there's something else that troubles me, and no one seems able to tell me anything on the matter, though I speak of it to Bryce regularly every morning, when she comes for my keys. That is, what is going to be done with that little child, that bad-tempered little creature who nearly dragged my head off my shoulders—he'll grow up just such another as his aunt, take my word for it, my dear. Now I want to know if he's to be a fixture here as well as the aunt, and what they mean to do with him when they're off on their honeymoon—

that is, if there is to be a honeymoon, which, all things considered, I'm rather disposed to doubt. Will they leave him here, with that sullen, bad-tempered maid, whom none of the servants like, she carries her head so high, or will they take him off to Paris with them, or Rome, or wherever they mean to go?"

Again Judith shook her head.

"Why not ask Wolf himself what he means to do with the child?" she suggested.

The words were scarcely off her lips before the door opened and Wolf made his appearance. He had a letter in his hand.

"I have brought you good news from Oscar," he said, his face wearing the nearest approach to gladness of which it was capable. "He has passed the preliminary exam. well, and has been well received by his chief that is to be. Altogether his letter is the brightest we have had from him yet."

Mrs. Reece stretched out her hand for the letter.

"Judith will read it to me. presently," she said; "but, Wolf, there is something I

am very anxious to ask you about. In fact, it was on my lips just as you came in. What are you going to do with the small child who I hear—for he has tremendous screaming and fighting fits at times—is still in the house? Does he come as part of the aunt's trousseau that we shall have to give permanent house-room to, or has he other relatives who will charge themselves with him?"

It was evident, since Bertie's onslaught on her cap and spectacles, that the old lady's feelings towards him had suffered a slight modification.

Wolf's face grew dark again.

"I ought to have told you," he said. "I intend to adopt Bertie—to treat him as my own child. He will hold the place of a son in the house."

Then he laid down Oscar's letter, and cut short his mother's exclamations by at once leaving the room.

"So," thought Judith, "this is the shorter road he has found to secure to himself and a greater number of persons

a greater amount of happiness than has been lost to them."

That same night—or, rather, between two and three o'clock of the following morning—Judith was aroused by old Bryce creeping stealthily into her room, and standing by her bedside.

"What is it?" asked Judith, starting up from a troubled sleep,—all her sleep was troubled in those days. "What has happened?"

"Oh, nothing much; don't alarm yourself," said the old body composedly, shutting tight the door behind her, although she had herself ascertained the fact that every other soul in the house was safe in the arms of Morpheus. "Only, after they—you know who I mean, miss—went up to their rooms to-night, I listened for a time outside their door, and I thought you might like to know what I heard."

"Yes?" This interrogatively.

Delphine had returned from London that afternoon. Judith had dreaded what was coming from the moment she had heard

her exclaim in her loudest soprano as she entered the hall :

“Oh, my Wolf, I have had such a glorious visit this time! London seemed at its gayest and best. Ah, what a grand, delicious city it is!”

“It’s nothing much I have to tell,” Bryce went on; “they spoke in whispers, I could only catch a word or two here and there. Once she said—Miss Delphine, I mean—‘He was furious. I had much ado to quiet him; but I managed it after a fashion.’ Do you understand what that means, Miss Judith?”

“Yes,” answered Judith, after a moment of thought; “I think I can understand to whom she referred.”

It seemed to her that the “he” and the “him” in this case must, without a doubt, mean the sailor-like individual whom in thought she had connected with Delphine’s visits to London.

“And then they talked and talked—oh, for more than an hour, and I listened, and listened, but could hear nothing, they spoke

so low, till at last Miss Delphine gave her long, strange laugh, and said : ‘ Well, one thing’s certain—that business will be over and done with by the end of the year.’ What can that mean, Miss Judith ? ”

What indeed ! Judith’s brain felt stunned for the moment, then ached dully with the thought of unknown terrors which she dared not put into words.

“ Give me time to think, Bryce ; it means something terrible, I haven’t a doubt. Go away, now ; leave me alone,” and she pressed her hot eye-balls with her cold hands, vainly trying to shape the indefinable fears that came thronging upon her into something definite and tangible.

Bryce made one step towards the door, retraced it, and came back to the bedside.

“ Miss Judith,” she said, “ you did promise me you would get back that evil ring of yours from Mr. Wolf, if you could. I’m sure we shall none of us know what peace is till it’s gone to the bottom of the blessed stream.”

“ Oh, go away, Bryce—go away—don’t

torment me ; I'm trying to think," moaned Judith.


"Well, Miss Judith, if you won't do it yourself, you might let me try what I can do. If you'd give me his diamond ring I'd take it to him and say you wanted yours back again," contended the old woman.

"Take the diamond, then—it's in that little drawer of the toilette-table—and do what you like. Only go away at once, and leave me to think," insisted Judith.

Bryce victorious departed content.



CHAPTER III.

“VER for certain by the end of the year !” The words kept repeating themselves in Judith’s brain with the iteration of a minute-bell all that day and the next.

It was a bitter morning. Judith sat in her own room with her feet on the fender, shivering, in spite of a huge, crackling wood-fire.

Outside, a furious east wind beat against the panes; the old trees, creaking and groaning, tossed their bare, brown arms like so many weird, evil prophetesses to a hazy, leaden sky. In the lulls of the blast one could hear the rush and tumble of the cataract in the wood, swollen by late heavy-falling rains into a dashing, swirling flood.

It was dreary enough outside ; it was drearier still within ; and Judith's thoughts on this particular morning piled up the dreariness tenfold—a thousandfold.

“Over for certain by the end of the year!” There was no getting the dismal words out of her ears, fight against them as she would. Why, who could say what might or might not be over by the end of the year? Health might be gone—fortune, friends, happiness, even life itself. Who could tell? No one, unless they had taken certain measures to produce certain inevitable results.

There came at this moment the sound of a window opening overhead, followed by a smart rattling fall of something on the terrace-flags below. Why, surely not! That could not be Delphine scattering her sweatmeats as usual to welcome little Bertie on his return from his morning walk? No one with a grain of human feeling would have sent out a fragile little child to face this cutting, blustering gale. All-apprehensive, she went to the window, and looked

out. There was little Bertie, creeping, not bounding, up the gravel-path, closely followed by Olivette. He looked white and nipped, as well he might, and seemed disinclined to stop to gather up the tempting-looking bon-bons which lay scattered on the stones.

Olivette, however, gathered them together for the child, popping one now and again into his mouth. How ridiculous it was of them to feed the poor child in this way with sugar! Sooner or later it would tell on him. No wonder he looked so white and puny.

“Over for certain by the end of the year.” Once more the words seemed to repeat themselves, and Judith, looking down into Bertie’s pale, pitiful face, seemed all in a minute to take in their meaning.

What were those sweetmeats? Why did these women force them upon the child when he was so evidently disinclined for them? These and a hundred other questions suggested themselves in a rapid succession, resolving themselves one and all

at last into the simple and most practical one of—What was to be done now? What could she do for the best?

Judith was by nature no plotter, and it may very well be doubted whether, under any pressure of circumstances, she could ever have played the part successfully. Only one idea suggested itself to meet the exigency of the moment—to go downstairs to Wolf, now in his study, say to him, “Bertie is ill; you must have a doctor at once.”

This she accordingly prepared to do. On the landing outside she met old Dr. Williamson on his way to Mrs. Reece’s room; she asked him not to leave the house till she had seen him again, as there was another patient for him; then on she went to Wolf’s study, knocked at the door, and asked if she might come in.

“Come in,” said Wolf, with a slight accent of surprise, and Judith went in to find him, not as usual at his writing-table, surrounded with account and other books, but in an easy-chair on one side of the wide

fireplace, while Delphine, with a leopard-skin thrown gracefully across her knees, reclined in a low chair on the other.

Why—why, what was this? Not five minutes ago this woman had been in her room over Judith's, throwing sweetmeats out of the window! Had she a dual existence, and with one life mounted perpetual guard over Wolf, while with the other she carried out her own evil machinations?

For one moment Judith faltered. Only for one moment, however; the next she had gone quietly up to Wolf, and said:

“I am very sorry to disturb you, but little Bertie is ill, I am sure, and as Dr. Williamson is here, I thought you might like him to see the child.”

It was a bold speech to make in the presence of Bertie's aunt, protectress, and guardian.

Wolf, who had risen from his chair as she spoke, stared at her blankly. Delphine's eyes gave one lurid flash, as of lightning out of a dark cloud. She had some Christmas-

roses and a few holly-leaves on her lap ; she twirled them together into a little bouquet, and tossed them into the clear, blazing fire. Then she laughed :

“ Ah ! how it crackles and spits fire ! ” Then she turned to Judith abruptly : “ My Bertie ill, did you say—my darling, my treasure ? Ah, why has no one said this before to me ? Ring the bell, my Wolf—ring the bell, and have the little one in. Ah, if he should die, if he should die ! Ah, ring the other bell, Miss Judith, and send for the doctor at once. How good and kind you are to every living soul who crosses your path ! Young men or maidens, old men or children, it’s all one to you, you open your heart to them all ! ”

Judith turned her back on her. How could Wolf stand there, listening to her, and not feel the marrow frozen in his bones ?

“ Will you ring the bell, or shall I ? ” she asked.

Wolf rang the bell mutely, and an order was given for Bertie to be brought and

a message to be taken requesting Dr. Williamson's presence in the study.

"We shall never be thankful enough to you, Miss Judith, for your kind, watchful care, shall we, my Wolf?" said Delphine in her sweet, low tones. But her eyes said: "All right, Miss Judith, one to you this time, two to me next."

Bertie, in Olivette's arms, entered the room simultaneously with the doctor.

The little fellow seemed scared by the grave faces he saw gathered about him. He fought the doctor when he tried to take him in his arms; he shrank in positive terror from Wolf's outstretched hand; but he smiled, though somewhat tearfully, as his eyes rested on Judith's face. It ended with Olivette whispering something in his ear, which caused him to stand silent and submissive in the middle of the room, looking round him with a somewhat startled air.

The doctor surveyed the child keenly, remarked that he was not looking as a child of his years should, put many questions to Olivette, which were answered

curtly and to the point, a few to Delphine, which elicited a touching little history of her sister's fragile health and early death, and of the remarkable likeness that existed in many respects between Bertie and his dead mother.

The doctor grew inquisitive over the boy's dietary.

"There is no disease that I can detect," he said, after using his stethoscope to his heart's content, "but there are febrile symptoms I do not like, and which possibly arise from gastric disturbance."

Judith came forward.

"I think," she said, fixing her eyes on Delphine, not on the doctor, "Bertie has too many bon-bons."

"Bon-bons!" exclaimed Dr. Williamson; "they must be stopped at once. They lie at the bottom of the half of children's diseases. To some children sweets are simply poison—slow, subtle, but nevertheless sure. I must beg of you, madam," turning to Delphine, "to put your sweets

in their proper place—behind the fire. The little fellow will soon get back his roses then.”

“Ah, dear Miss Judith, how kind, how thoughtful of you! you put your finger on the weak point at once,” murmured Delphine in the same sweet tones as before, as the doctor rose to take his leave. But her eyes once more flashed an odd light, and said: “Two to you this time, Miss Judith: four to me next.”

Judith made no reply, but left the room after the doctor.

Bertie was saved this time, she felt, but for how long?

Finding herself watched, detected, thwarted, would Delphine give up her evil designs, or would the wicked spirit that ruled her only suggest more subtle forms of iniquity? Judith much feared the latter. She could not picture to herself Delphine sitting down, quiet and submissive, under any defeat, small or great. She racked her brain, vainly endeavouring to think of extra safeguards for the

defenceless little one. She would rouse Mrs. Reece, if possible, to take an interest in the child. She would entreat Wolf to give him a new nurse. Yet, somehow, her heart misgave her as to the success she would be likely to meet with in either endeavour. Mrs. Reece was resolute in her likes and dislikes. She had evidently, since the little fellow had declined the honour of her friendship, shut her heart against him; and this door, once locked, was not easy to open, as Judith had found from experience.

And as for Wolf—ah me! her heart somehow went down like quicksilver on a rainy day as she thought of a certain strange light which had shone in his eyes of late as they had rested on Delphine, and which seemed, to her fancy, to tell the bitter truth that he had listened so long to the voice of the siren, that his senses were absolutely becoming enthralled and spell-bound by it.

That night, Bryce once again stood

beside Judith's couch and whispered a brief report.

"I haven't much to tell you, Miss Judith," she said; "they spoke low, as they always do, and she—Miss Delphine, that is—laughed more than ever I heard her before. The only words of sense I could make out of it all was that, next time, she would take care that you were out of the house. Yes, Miss Judith, those were her very words, whatever they may mean!"



CHAPTER IV.

SO the old year spun itself out, and Delphine's prophecy remained unfulfilled. So far as anyone at Plas-y-Coed could see, nothing but itself came to an end at midnight on the 31st of December.

Little Bertie, on strictly regulated diet, blossomed out in renewed health, and Dr. Williamson would have ceased his attendance on him had it not been for Delphine's earnest entreaties that he should "interview" him at least every other day in the week.

"For my darling is so fragile, doctor," she pleaded; "an east wind, even, might carry him off. Great Heavens! what I suffer sometimes when I bend over him

as he sleeps, and see how terribly like he is to his dear, dead mother. Ah, promise me, doctor, to keep your eye on him all through this bitter winter. What should I do without him, my darling, my treasure, my all?"

Of course Dr. Williamson yielded to her entreaties, and went away thinking to himself how rare it was to find such truly maternal devotion, coupled with attractions so many and varied that most possessors of them would have deemed themselves thereby exonerated from the practice of the minor mundane virtues.

Most people, thrown into close daily contact with Delphine, were compelled, sooner or later, to yield to her eerie fascinations. At first, generally, they were startled by her fantastic unconventionalities; it might be, even terrified by odd caprices of voice, look, manner, which baffled alike experience and reason. Little by little, however, the witchery of her dark, changeful beauty, her trained grace of action, would make itself appre-

hended, and people who began their acquaintance with her fearfully, wonderingly, would, inch by inch, find their wonder growing into admiration, their bewilderment merging into infatuation.

Hers was a veritable *beauté de diable*. A subtle, maddening, intoxicating kind of thing that set men's brains on fire, dazzled their eyes till they refused perforce to take stock of aught that alloyed or blemished such a combination of loveliness, led them *ignis-fatuus* like over marsh and mire in pursuit, left them stranded and weak at last, incapable alike of following the path they had chosen or returning to that they had left. A man with a clear conscience or with a strong human love holding his heart, might have opposed coat-of-mail to her poisoned arrows, but woe to the poor wight who, destitute of these, dared risk the fray! If he came out of it something less than the remnant of a man, he would only have his own hardihood to thank for it.

Wolf, preoccupied, conscience-palsied,

brain-weighted, had taken, as he had mapped out his somewhat troubled course, no count of these deceptive quicksands which lay right athwart his path. Other dangers farther ahead he had noted and sought to avoid, but these at his very feet he had, in his far-sightedness, overlooked. Had anyone, in the early days of his fatal intimacy with Delphine, whispered words of warning, they would have fallen on dulled ears. Strong in his love for Judith, he would have laughed to scorn the idea that in any other eyes than hers he would care to read the light of love.

Later on, as time and circumstance put Judith far and farther out of his reach, he would still have scouted the notion that any other than she could ever enter in and fill that great, empty heart of his. But now, as the desolate winter days went slowly creeping by, somehow he began to find that a soft, vibrating voice saying tenderly, "My Wolf—oh, my Wolf!" had a weird fascination

for him, and that a pair of dark, dangerous, changeful black eyes were beginning to chase from his memory the pure, clear light of a certain pair of hazel ones.

Yet, so paradoxical was this man becoming in his moods, when one day old Bryce went to him, bringing back his diamond ring, and asking for Judith's bloodstone in return, he stared at her blankly at first, furiously afterwards, as though she had asked him to pluck out a right eye or cut off a right hand.

"If Miss Judith wants her ring, let her come to me and ask me for it," he thundered; "only to her asking will I give it up."

Then a change swept over his face. He went penitently up to the old woman and took her by the arm.

"Look here, Bryce," he said in a voice that trembled with the restraint he put upon it, "you are old, and I am, I suppose, scarcely yet to be counted with the middle-aged. For all that I

haven't the least doubt but what I shall go down into the earth before you. Now I charge you solemnly"—here his hand tightened upon her arm till it gripped her like a vice—"when I lie in my coffin you yourself come to my side, see that this ring is on my finger, and that it goes into the grave with me."

Then he had released her, gone straight into his study, and with Delphine's hand in his, and a Baedeker open before them, had planned out a deliciously enjoyable wedding-tour through the south of Europe.

When the new year dawned, and that "old, antediluvian, Time," set to work winding-up, cleaning, regulating, and starting afresh all his half worn-out clocks, Judith set herself to face steadily two events which every minute that ran out of the aforesaid old clocks brought nearer to her. One was Wolf's marriage with Delphine, the other was her father's return to England and her consequent departure from the Reece household.

Both events she found difficult to realise. Though she said to herself, at least a hundred times a day, "He will soon be wholly hers, body and soul," she could not bring herself to believe the words as she spoke them; she might as well have talked to herself of the great day of judgment, of the sun being turned into darkness, of the moon into blood—as well could she bring before her mind in grand, distorted picturesqueness the one event as the other.

Then, too, as she read her father's kindly, loving letters, his lavish promises of the good things he meant to shower upon her in the days to come, his glowing pictures of a wealthy, peaceful home, where care and sorrow would be barred and bolted out; were equally difficult of realisation. Everything in the future seemed to her blurred, misty, indistinct; only the dreary, living present seemed actual and true. In this she felt her life centred; with it, as it slipped

from her view and her grasp, she felt as though her life must depart.

* * * * *

On New Year's Day, a dreary portent for the young year, there came to her a troubled, weary letter from Uncle Pierre. It was dated from Peking some two months previously :

“MY CHILD,” so he wrote—

“This will be the last letter I shall send to you from this place. I am ordered by my bishop, who is the head of this mission, to go into retreat, first at Palermo, afterwards at Versailles. So I go. Into silence I go, my child, for my voice as preacher and teacher on this earth will be heard no more. My superiors tell me, and I bow to what they say, that of late I have erred in my teaching, that I have spoken not with the voice of the Church, but with the voice of my own heart. Ah me! that voice seemed so like the voice

of God to me, I was forced to give utterance to it! Of late it was so loud, so supreme to me, I could hear no other. So I speak and preach no more. But I pray, my child, I pray none the less for all poor suffering souls, for all poor sorrowing ones, for you, my Judith, my well-beloved child, that soon, face to face in the Father's kingdom, we may clasp hands that will never need to be lifted in prayer again.

“Your uncle,

“PIERRE.”

Judith crept away into silence and solitude with her letter to hide her tears.

For the matter of that, however, she might just as well have stayed where she was. None would have uttered a word of remonstrance had she washed away her eyesight with her crying. There was no one to seat himself by her side now and say pitifully: “Child, child, you must not give way like this; I cannot—cannot bear it!”

CHAPTER V.

DELPHINE'S trousseau seemed to give her a good deal of trouble about the beginning of the year. She made frequent visits to London, returning from each visit, if possible, more blithe and radiant than before; also, if the truth be spoken, a trifle more exacting of attention from Wolf, a shade more erratic and fantastic in her manner of conducting herself towards the other members of the household. Wolf, so she decreed, was to escort her to the station at Pen Cwellym, she driving her fiery little ponies; Wolf was to meet her when she came back; Wolf was to desert the family dinner-table and dine alone with her on the evening of her return; Wolf was to sit

with her in the drawing-room afterwards, or in the rooms she had specially dedicated to the shrine of nicotine, whence in addition to the highly perfumed fragrance of her cigarettes would issue the wildest strains of Spanish canzonets or Italian bravura, or occasionally the most weird and mournful of Swiss or German lullabys. At one time one might fancy a whole troupe of half-mad prima-donnas held wild carnival within; at another that some solitary sea-maiden was mourning, to the time and tune of the waves, her lover's death, or else soothing him to slumber with a siren's lullaby.

Mrs. Reece, imprisoned in her own room, naturally saw and heard but little of all this. She had taken into her head the comfortable belief that sooner or later Delphine would throw Wolf over, and when elderly ladies of resolute temper get sturdy notions into their heads they are somewhat difficult to uproot.

"My dear," she would say to Judith on every occasion of Delphine's visits to

London, "do you think she'll come back this time? Has she taken anything extra with her? Does the maid seem to be packing up?"

As for Judith, she felt herself daily shrinking more and more from the society of both Wolf and Delphine. How it would all end not she nor any other living soul could by any possibility have averred. As before, she could not see one hand's breadth in front of her; she only felt that clouds—veritable thunder-clouds—were encompassing them all, and that sooner or later they must burst. Her former fatigue of heart had left her now; she no longer mourned even to herself, "We are so tired, my heart and I;" she felt herself ever on the alert, as though her very life were merged in her senses—in those at least of seeing and hearing, for her powers of speech just then appeared to have well-nigh deserted her.

So the winter hours went limping past, haggard, wry-faced, joyless things, every

one of them ; each, with a terribly strong family likeness to the other ; each, if possible, a little more of a laggard than the last. How they all got through that winter Judith never knew. Hopelessly, interminably, it dragged its slow length along, fighting, so it seemed to her, harder and harder for its life, as its days drew towards their end, till at length, in a terrific struggle and out burst of rain, hail, sleet, east wind, and ice, it died hard in the very bosom of spring.

Spring, regnant once more, greening every lane, tree, hedge, field, ditch, brought no promise of hope this year to Judith's heart. It brought but a scanty store also for poor Mrs. Reece, whose rheumatism showed no signs of succumbing to old Dr. Williamson's lotions or unremitting attention. Her health began to suffer from her lack of bodily exercise ; with her health, her spirits sank by a degree or two ; she became less confident of Delphine's elopement

with some unheard-of stranger ; she grew fretful and irritable at the mention of the word India, for the double reason that it recalled to her the fact that Oscar would soon be departing thither, and that Colonel Wynne would soon be returning thence and claiming his daughter.

Also, about this time, another circumstance added somewhat to her melancholy ; poor old Falstaff, her faithful friend and companion for so many years, overcome by age and infirmities, died at her very feet, his head resting on her footstool.

“The ill-mannered brute !” cried Delphine, when she heard of this, clasping her hands on top of her head and sinking languidly into a rocking-chair ; “he should have gone away into a corner to die. No one should have the effrontery to die in public. No living soul shall see me in my death-struggles. I’ll answer for that ! Fancy some half-dozen people staring down on one, watching one’s eyes getting glassy, and one’s limbs rigid ! No ; when I die you shall see me as I am to-

day—you shall look for me to-morrow!" and from this expression of sentiment she glided, according to her wont, into the barcarolle from Masaniello, that, in its turn, giving place to snatches of airs from Don Giovanni, an opera for which she evinced a most marked affection.

Possibly about the best thing the dreary new year had to bring to the Reece family, was continued good tidings of and from Oscar. His letters were little by little going back to their old tone of careless good-nature, and easy bad grammar. Now that he had forced himself to learn the irremediableness of his sorrow, he was evidently setting himself to face and fight it manfully. Life is all paradoxes; the irreparable is most easily repaired, the unconquerable (even death itself) conquered.

Towards the end of winter he had brought himself to talk almost hopefully of his Indian appointment; towards the end of spring he was growing absolutely impatient for the time for sailing. He

wrote long (for him, that is) loving letters to his mother, to Wolf, to Judith, and even went so far as to pen a few fragmentary missives to Delphine, whom he was evidently trying to bring himself to look upon as a future member of the family.

Delphine made very merry over these slight epistles in the solitude of her own room; the manifest effort with which they were written amused her, the little final note of sadness, with which some of them concluded, stirred her contempt.

“Here’s Narcissus again doing a Niobe,” she said, making the latest received into a pellet, and throwing it at Olivette’s head.

But Olivette, occupied in reading a letter of her own, accorded her sister but a scanty attention.

“Oh, that’s from your Narcissus, I suppose?” Delphine went on, determined to have an audience. “Oh, ah—h, what a much pleasanter world this would be if Narcissuses were extinct.”

“Including your own, I suppose?” retorted Olivette derisively.

“My dear, I have no Narcissus, I have no patience with the tribe—a Polypheme, if you like. If you had but seen him this evening, as I sang to him, and he stood just under the lamp—ah, so grey, and wrinkled, and ugly, yet so grand! No, no, you may keep your Narcissus, and enjoy him if you will, my dear; give me a Cyclops—a Cyclops I can chain, and drive half mad, and let go and beckon back again. Ah, that’s a sort of thing worth doing,” and a low, long laugh trilled forth once more.

Olivette folded her letter and put it by.

“There’s something here you’ll like to hear,” she said a little sullenly, for Delphine’s manner of speaking of her lover invariably ruffled her temper.

“Ah, Steve, I suppose, has added another acre to his cottage!” queried Delphine indifferently.

“No such thing, Steve has sold his

cottage, and is off to Mexico. He has bought a farm out there for next to nothing. But that wasn't what I thought would interest you, it was something about Phil Munday."

"About Phil Munday! What?" and Delphine suddenly awakened to an unmistakable interest in Olivette's letter.

"He says that Phil is wanted by the police at Montreal. Before he came over to England it seems he was for about three months working as letter-carrier in the town, a number of letters containing money were missed, and——"

"Ah, bravo, *bravissimo!* I knew something would turn up, and it has."

And Delphine, starting from her chair, jumping at least two feet from the ground, alighting on the tips of her toes as only a practised dancer can. Then she went close to her sister, and breathlessly put a whole string of questions.

"When, where, how had this thing happened? How did Steve know of it? Could it certainly be brought home to

Phil Munday? When would Steve write again?"

Olivette shook her head in reply to each one. Steve had written on the eve of starting for Mexico; when he would write again she did not know. All he said was he had heard it rumoured that the police were after Phil Munday for robbing the post-bags.

Delphine grew grave, speaking in jerky whispers.

"You must find out the truth for me. If I can but handcuff him now—or threaten to do so, better still—it will keep him quiet. But I must know more. I mustn't try for a grand throw, and spoil my game. No, I will not say one word till I am sure. I must just keep him quiet with promises. I have told him my Wolf and I quarrel so dreadfully, if I made the attempt now I should be at once detected, and I have told him St. Judith must be out of the house before I can do anything——"

"Yes," interrupted Olivette with an air

of decision ; “ St. Judith must be out of the house before you do anything, or she’ll spoil your game, not a doubt. When does she go ? ”

“ The father is expected some time in June, not before. Well, this is February. I have four months to keep him quiet ; it will be hard work, and will take a lot of spare cash, for he gets more ravenous every time I see him. Ah well, my Wolf is generous. No matter what I ask I always have.”

“ It seems to me, if you go on at this rate, you’ll ruin your Wolf, and have nothing left worth playing for. You mustn’t forget between you the two thousand pounds you are to pay me.”

“ My dear, you are not likely to let me forget. But you must earn it, remember. It strikes me it’ll take close upon another two thousand to keep Phil Munday quiet for four months.”

“ Couldn’t the girl some way be got out of the house sooner ? ”

Delphine shook her head.

“If she went out of the house to-morrow, what could I do till I have my blow ready? Between ourselves, I’m not sorry the sweetmeat business was a failure. I’m not so sure but what at the very last the Beast might have turned rusty, and refused the bribe I meant to offer. He might have been obstinate, and insisted on my marrying him, after all, and—and getting rid of Wolf. But now, if this is only true, I have the whip-hand of him, and he shall know it. Now find out for me, as quickly as possible, all you can, By June—by mid-summer, say—I shall be ready; the girl will be gone, the imp disposed of. Ah, how glorious!”

She spoke off abruptly for a moment.

“Hark! Did you hear anything—any-one move outside the door?”

For a few minutes they both listened intently, then their talk fell into whispers.

Bryce, standing by Judith’s bedside, aroused her between one and two o’clock that same night.

“I am sure they are sisters, those two,” she said, nodding her old head wisely; “and I’m sure they’ve been on the stage, both of them.”

“That does not interest me,” said Judith coldly. “I have no wish to know who or what they are. Is there anything else you have to tell me?”

“They’ve made up their minds to do something—what, I don’t know, but they won’t attempt it till you are out of the house. They seem more afraid of you than of any mortal soul.”

“Yes? Was that all you heard, Bryce?”

“All,” sighed Bryce; “they talked so low, and the walls that side are so thick. On the other they are nothing but lath and plaster, and one might hear everything. Ah, if I dared go through the tapestry-room one night and go along the outer passage——”

“What’s that?” asked Judith sharply. “Why, Bryce, you know as well as I do that the tapestry-room is bricked up.”

Bryce laughed.

“On this side, Miss Judith. They didn’t know—not one of the men who did the work here, one half that I could have told them. The tapestry-room has three entrances. There’s a door inside one of the cupboards in my room (the housekeeper’s room, I mean, miss), which opens on to a flight of stairs that leads right up to a door at the back of the tapestry bed. No one knew of that, Miss Judith, and I wasn’t going to tell them. Why should I? It may be, when the right master comes into the house, he won’t choose to have his grandfather’s room bricked up in that fashion as though it were a tomb.”

“Go on, Bryce. That is one entrance to the room; that makes two we know of. Now where is the third, and where does it lead?”

“The third, Miss Judith, is inside a cupboard that is on one side of the fire-place in the tapestry-room; it opens on a narrow passage which runs just outside

Miss Delphine's room. Her wall that side is thin—very thin, one could hear a pin fall on the floor.”

“Ah-h! Does any one in the house know of these entrances to the tapestry-room but yourself?”

“Not a soul, Miss Judith. All the servants are new, you see, and I'm not one to be gossiping to them,” in a tone of ineffable disdain. “Davies may have known of them at one time, but they have been out of use so long, I'm sure he has forgotten them. That passage outside Miss Delphine's room led at one time out through a window on to the leads where Master Bernard kept all his carrier-pigeons. When he went away once the squire had them cleared out and the way on to the leads stopped; the pigeons were for ever tumbling down the chimneys and pecking at the mortar, squire wouldn't be bothered with them. Now, if I dared go through the room and get into that passage——”

“No, no, no, Bryce,” exclaimed Judith

vehemently; "not to be thought of for a moment. She might hear you if the wall is so thin, and you would spoil everything. Now promise me—promise me—" this most earnestly, "that you won't on any account attempt such a thing."

A sudden idea had come to her, an idea which seemed to her like the opening of a door of hope by an angel hand. It grew and matured in her brain as the weeks and months in slow procession went by.



CHAPTER VI.

NEVER, surely, since the days when Vivien with “woven paces and with waving hands” put to sleep the “gentle wizard” in the hollow oak, was man so befooled, spell-bound, and enthralled by woman as was Wolf Reece by Delphine Pierpoint.

In her presence, or within sound of her voice, he seemed as inert, as “lost to life, and use, and name, and fame,” as ever did the sleeping Merlin. Not at a bound was this condition of things attained, but by successive stages—somewhat short and rapid ones it must be owned, but nevertheless easily apprehensible. In the first days of his acquaintance with Delphine he had shrunk from her

with a loathing and horror natural to a man brought suddenly face to face with a bold, unscrupulous woman who holds the secret of his life in her hands. Her arts, and blandishments, and beauty, seen in this light had repelled rather than fascinated him. Later on, as he knew her better, and sounded, as he thought, the shallowness of her nature, a feeling of disdain took the place of the shrinking and loathing he had previously felt; he grew to look upon her much as one might look upon a playful, petulant kitten, whom circumstance and chance, not nature, had made poisonous and dangerous.

From disdain to tolerance was but a step, and he took it. From toleration of her arts and caprices he learnt submission to them. Thence the road was easy and downhill into the realms of bewilderment and fascination itself, until at length—with truth it might have been said—no Parthenope, ancient or modern, ever held her enchanted one more securely than Delphine held her Wolf.

Yet the man at times had lucid intervals—short periods of returned consciousness and manhood—times when he loathed less the woman who had ensnared him than himself, the weak, befooled prisoner, when he chafed at the chains which bound him, tried his strength against them, made some wild, desperate struggle for freedom, and then went back sullenly to bondage once more.

These brief periods of vigour and returned reason generally occurred during one or other of Delphine's absences in London, when her wild, thrilling voice no longer woke up the echoes of the old house, and the apprehension of her soft, springing footfall ceased to make itself felt at every turn of the staircase, behind every half-opened door. If the line of demarcation he had chosen to set up between Judith and himself had not by this time grown to the strength and consistency of iron, it is possible Delphine's dominion would have been rudely shaken if not overthrown. As it was, however,

the very reverence he had for Judith, her truth and purity—he said to himself it was reverence, nothing more—kept him apart from her and helped him to lose his own soul a little faster.

Better that, so he said to himself, than taint hers by so much as a finger-print; better his own conscience burdened, scorching, seared beyond remedy, than hers overshadowed by so much as a passing cloud.

Sometimes—and this always when Delphine was away—a sudden terror would seize him lest, after all, some of the infection which, to his fancy, filled every nook and corner of the old place, might light upon Judith and poison her life springs.

Once this feeling came upon him with such overwhelming force that he could not withstand it; it seemed as though his good angel, whom he had shocked, grieved, wounded, warned off, and was now about to put to flight for ever, was whispering a farewell plea to him for the young girl who had been sent into

his house to be taken care of and made happy. "Send her away," it seemed to say, "before she grows into such an one as you are—as that other is." Not once, but again and again the voice made itself heard; and at last, one morning, he laid down his pen, closed his banker's-book, and went up and down the house looking for Judith.

It was nearly the middle of June now. Summer, with its glories, was draping the land and painting the skies; the gardens of the old Grange, a little recovered from their late uprooting and replanting, were shining out in summer colours, yielding their souls in summer fragrance, under a cloudless mid-day sun. Coming straight from his one-windowed study, with its odour of musty volumes, and from staring at his rows of figures, Wolf felt owl-like, half blinded; he stood for a few minutes on the terrace, shading his eyes with his hand, wondering whether he would find Judith in any of her favourite shady nooks among the laurels, or whether

she had wandered out, book in hand, into the woods beyond.

As he stood thus, a voice, soft, yet clear and trenchant, fell upon his ear. "I have not heard from him by the last mail, Bryce; I cannot say when he is coming," were the words he heard.

It was undoubtedly Judith speaking; she must be in the housekeeper's room, he thought; and a feeling something akin to reproach made itself felt that this young lady should be so destitute of companionship as to have to seek it among the servants of his household.

If he had only been a little more awake to what went on under his very eyelids, he might have known that Judith never under any circumstances found her way into Bryce's *sanctum sanctorum* except during Delphine's absences in London. He went straight into the small, dark room. As he entered, Bryce sharply shut an open cupboard-door near which she was standing, locked it, and put the key into her pocket. It was an odd, unaccountable

thing to do ; but, then, so many things that this old body did were odd and unaccountable.

He did not heed her ; he had something to say to Judith at that moment which absorbed all his thoughts. It did not matter that Bryce should be in the room to hear it. Of the two he rather preferred that a third person should be present, it would prevent the striking of painful chords, the introduction of matter essentially beside the point.

“Miss Wynne,” he said, going up to Judith, and making no pretence of prelude to what he had to say, “it has occurred to me that, since your father’s return appears likely to be somewhat delayed, a pleasanter house than ours might be found for you to stay in.”

It came upon her like a thunderbolt. She started, turning to a deathly pallor.

“Are you saying to me, ‘Go’?” she asked in a voice that trembled, vibrated, and died away in a muffled whisper.

Wolf went on as though he had not heard her.

“I have been thinking well over the matter, and it seems to me, that if it suit you, Dr. Martin’s house at Richmond would be a bright and happy home for you—at any rate, till you hear from your father and learn what his wishes are.”

Judith only stood still, staring at him blankly, and repeating in the same unnatural tone as before :

“Are you saying to me ‘Go’?”

It had occurred to her that necessity might arise for her departure; that of her own free will she might leave the house; but not that he would come to her in this dry, apathetic manner and bid her depart.

He gathered together his strength and essayed to answer her.

“Yes, I say ‘Go,’ because I feel, I see, I know that it will be better for you to do so? How shall I explain? Why do you wish me to explain? Have you not

eyesight and understanding of your own ? ”

For the life of him he could not keep his heart from making itself heard in his voice, just a note or two.

Judith's eyes drooped, but her lips refused to give out a sound. She looked fragile, slender, like some bending white lily, as she stood there silent by his side. She still wore her deep mourning for Aunt Maggie. It added possibly a shade of pallor to her always pale face.

He went on with increasing earnestness.

“I feel sure they would do their best to make you happy at The Retreat. Theo is a good girl; you seemed to get on well together. If you will consent, I will write to Dr. Martin to-day, and arrange for your going there in a day or two ? ”

Still no reply from Judith.

He grew impatient, imperious, as his wont was when thwarted. Why did she set herself in this way to make a long

matter of what need be such a short one, to stir up feelings which he felt lay only too dangerously near the surface?

"Of course," he went on, trying to make his voice as hard and inflexible as voice could be, "I cannot turn you out of the house if you wish to stay on; but I tell you frankly that it will be an immense relief to me if you will go."

"I will go." It was slowly, resolutely said, but in such low tones as to be scarcely audible.

"Thank you. I felt sure that, if you thought over it, you would see the advisability of your leaving us. To-day is Tuesday, will it suit you for me to take you up on Thursday to the Martins? I shall be going up to say my good-bye to Oscar in a day or two, as you know."

"Thank you, I will travel alone," in the same slow, resolute tone as before.

Wolf started. He was scarcely prepared for this. Yet, after all, perhaps it would be better so. Away from Delphine,

alone with Judith for hours! The temptation would be hideously great. Yes, undoubtedly it would be a better arrangement.

"Very well," he said coldly, "since you prefer it. What day may I fix for your going? They will naturally wish to know."

Judith thought awhile.

"Thursday, next week, will suit me," she answered, and only a faint quiver of her down-drooped eyelid showed that she had a vestige of feeling on the matter at all.

"Very well, then; Thursday, next week, let it be," said Wolf, and fearful of breaking the thin ice on which he knew he stood, he turned abruptly, and left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. REECE became by turns indignant, expostulatory, vociferous, and denunciatory, when she heard of Judith's projected departure from Plas-y-Coed.

She catechised Judith ruthlessly on the matter.

“Why, why, why, my dear, what does it all mean? What can be sending you away from us just now, just at the very end of your visit? Has Wolf been particularly discourteous to you? I know he has grown morose, almost beyond bearing, of late, but I don't really think he means anything, certainly does not intend any personal rudeness, and I'm sure, if I spoke to him on the matter,

he would at once apologise. He's not a particularly good hand at apologising, but still, I feel sure he would do it if I asked him."

"Oh, no, no," interrupted Judith hastily. "There is nothing whatever for him to apologise to me for, I assure you."

"Then, my dear, why are you going away from us? You surely are not running away from that fast young woman, who has so marvellously succeeded in blinding and fascinating my son? Dear me! dear me! To think that both my sons should have made such a mess of their love-affairs! Now, honestly, my dear, is it on account of this Miss Delphine that you are leaving the house?"

Judith felt that a portion of the truth might possibly succeed better than anything else in silencing the old lady's interrogatories and setting her mind at rest.

"It is on account of Miss Pierpoint that I am going," she answered quietly.

Mrs. Reece's exclamations then took another turn.

"Dear me, dear me, Judith, you surprise me! I took you to be a girl of another sort altogether. I thought your quietness meant strength, resolution, and now I find that after all it means nothing more than any other girl's at nineteen—no, twenty—you are just twenty now, are you not? To think that you should allow a woman of that sort to disturb your peace of mind, and turn you out of the house! My dear, what would you do if you had to face one half the troubles I have had to go through? Would you throw up your hands and run away from them, leaving those behind to do the best they could?"

Judith struggled painfully to keep her composure.

"Dear, dear Mrs. Reece, I feel leaving you—oh, I cannot tell you how deeply," she contrived to say; "you have been goodness and kindness itself to me."

"Then why go, Judith?" asked Mrs.

Reece testily. "No one is driving you out of the house. I know the place must seem dreadfully dull and stupid to a girl at your age; but I don't believe you will find Richmond a bit better place to live in. From what Theo tells me, it is horribly suburban, split into cliques and sets, not one of whom will have anything to do with the other. There is the high-church set, and the low-church set, and the middle-church set, and the Catholic set, and a whole army of dissenters, whom no one meets anywhere, but who, nevertheless, do exist!"

"Oh, how can cliques and sets matter to me? You know I shall go nowhere, and see no one, till my father returns."

"Then, my dear, for all I can see to the contrary, you may just as well stay where you are." And then, in another key, she repeated the same song; dwelt pitifully on her increasing age and infirmities; on the pleasure Judith's society had been to her; on her loneliness and

desolation in the days to come, with not a soul to speak a kindly, sympathetic word to her. "Here I shall be, my dear," she concluded pathetically, "all alone—for Phœbe doesn't count for much—in my own room, from morning till night. Wolf, somewhere, I suppose, playing at love—for it isn't the real thing—with that fast young woman. Oscar away in India, and you—ah, you!—who might have stayed with me and made my life pleasant to me, miles and miles away, and only an occasional slip of paper to tell me you are in the land of the living at all!"

All this, and a great deal more of remonstrance and reproach Judith had to endure, not once, but a hundred times over, before the day for her departure arrived.

Delphine, returning from what she intended to be her last journey to London before her marriage, heard with not a little surprise of Judith's plans.

"Ah, the fates fight for me!" she cried,

clapping her tightly-gloved hands together, and pirouetting for Olivette's benefit round the room.

"Let the fates be! What about Phil Munday?" queried Olivette, always bent on the practical and matter-of-fact.

"Ah, the wretch! the toad! the awkward crab! the sour cabbage! Yes, I quieted him. Promised! Ah, what didn't I promise him? And all the while I had your letter from Steve in my pocket. Oh, if I had shown it him, it would have made him feel for a knife to stab me to the heart!"

"Why didn't you tell him what you knew? Threaten him with the police and be done with him."

"Ah, my dear, things are not finally settled yet; it would set him thinking and planning to thwart me once more. No, I wait till I have played my game and won; I wait till I have got rid of the little imp and married my Polyphemus, before I strike my final blow. See, things are settling themselves now. I give them but a

touch and on they go—smoothly, gloriously, like a sleigh down a snow-hill. Next week will be a week of events, my sister. On Monday, my Wolf will go to London, meet Narcissus, and go hand-in-hand with him to Marseilles, where they will make their adieux. On Thursday, departs St. Judith! May blessings follow her every step of the way she treads! On Friday—ah, we will pass over that day, it will be the day we strike our blow. My Wolf out of the way, the Saint gone, what day could happen better? On Saturday, back comes my Wolf by the first train; he will get here by seven in the morning, travelling all night. I tell him what has happened; we mourn together; we search together for the little imp. By-and-by they bring in his body; we mourn again together; we go to the funeral together; and then the day after we go up to London together. We go to a registrar's-office and get married—ah, so quietly! (after such a calamity we must do things quietly, you know); and then we start for Paris—dear, darling wicked Paris!

And from Paris I write to the wretch and tell him I have done his bidding!" Here her long low laugh echoed through the room. "I wish him health and happiness to the end of his days. I tell him I know all about the post-bag robberies, and I will set the police on him the very minute he grows troublesome; but that if he keeps quiet, and only if he keeps quiet, there will be a hundred pounds every three months for him to the end of his life, not a sou more, not a sou less. Ah! I am—oh, so tired. I can't say another word!" and thus ending her long speech, Delphine threw herself on the bed and prepared to settle to sleep for the night.

But Olivette had one word more to say.

"Supposing Phil Munday gets suspicious and comes down again to see how things are going on!" she whispered.

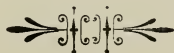
"Supposing! Raven! He—ush—sh!" cried Delphine, throwing out her arms at her as though to scare her away. "What should make the wretch suspicious? I was sweet as honey with him all day yesterday."

But Olivette was not to be so easily deterred from her croaking. She went one step nearer the bed.

“And supposing,” she whispered, “‘my Wolf,’ as you call him, does not see fit to go to London and get married, but chooses to set up a hue and cry after the child!”

“He set up a hue and cry, with me at his elbow to swear to him how it all happened, to soothe him, to charm him, implore—threaten him, if need be! Fiddlesticks, my dear! Go tell that story to the marines, not to your sister!”

And with this expression of incredulity, Delphine sank back on her bed once more, and in another minute was sleeping soundly, as though her pillow had been stuffed with benedictions, not feathers.



CHAPTER VIII.

WOLF set off for London to say his good-byes to Oscar on the Monday before Judith was to leave Plas-y-Coed. The ship in which Oscar had taken passage was to set sail on the succeeding Wednesday from Marseilles. Thus far on his journey Wolf had decided to accompany his brother ; he had much to say to him, many farewell counsels to give, many matters of importance to impress upon his mind, notably among them the fact that from henceforth his future must rest entirely in his own hands, for neither yearly allowance nor portion, great or small, was he to expect from the master of Plas-y-Coed.

These and equally weighty matters no

doubt filled every corner of Wolf's brain, as he breakfasted with Delphine and Judith on the morning of his departure, for he was singularly—even for him singularly—silent and abstracted throughout the repast.

“From Dr. Martin,” he said, handing to Judith a letter.

“Thank you,” was all Judith's reply, and she scanned quickly the good doctor's warm, kindly words of welcome to his home, and folded and returned the letter to Wolf with another brief “thank you.” These were the only words that passed between them during the short, dreary meal.

Delphine hovered over Wolf incessantly, till the time came for bringing round her ponies, like any gaoler over some notable captive, who, he feared, might escape him before the day for execution came round. She waited on him throughout breakfast; brought him his letters; hung about him as he opened and read them; followed him into his study, and sang her softest

and sweetest to him as he finished sorting and arranging his correspondence and business papers there; followed him out again into the garden, and stood side by side with him in the glinting sunlight, talking blithely with arch, frequent upward glances into his absent, weary eyes; went with him even into his mother's room to say good-bye before he started; had her own hat and dust-cloak brought to her there, and equipped herself in front of Mrs. Reece's mirror for driving him to the station. Mrs. Reece meanwhile recited folios of messages to be delivered to Oscar, her love, her disappointment at not seeing him again before he sailed, her earnest prayers for his happiness in the future.

Judith was seated, winding Mrs. Reece's knitting-cotton, when the two entered. She rose immediately to leave the room. Wolf intercepted her at the door.

"I will say good-bye to you now," he said, a little formally, and with a manifest effort. "I am off almost immediately."

"Good-bye," answered Judith, in a tone

that seemed the echo of his own. Then their fingers for one second touched, their eyes meantime looking away into the farther corners of the room, and she was gone.

So they parted.

Ten minutes after, Wolf, with Delphine by his side, drove away. Delphine in an altogether ecstatic frame of mind whipping up her fiery little ponies till they went along at an almost incredible speed.

“Ah, I would fly through air with you, my Wolf, as Francesca fled with her Paolo, sooner than say farewell,” she whispered, as they sped along the rocky road, with mountain, wood, and fields fleeting past them in wind-like haste.

A silence fell on the house that day—a silence not so much as flawed by Delphine’s return in the afternoon.

“May I live upstairs with you now, till I go?” Judith begged of Mrs. Reece. The old lady gave her permission to do so, though, truth to tell, a somewhat ungracious one, for she could scarcely

bring herself to regard the young girl's departure from the house in any light save that of a positive personal injury.

So the days went round, till Thursday, the day of more farewells, arrived; Judith keeping so strictly to the upper floor of the house and Mrs. Reece's apartments, that not once during these days did she and Delphine set eyes upon each other—a circumstance for which she scarcely knew how to be adequately grateful. It is possible that Delphine in a measure reciprocated her feelings, for, with a brain webbed and intricate as that of the great Machiavelli himself, she no doubt rejoiced in a freedom from observation which enabled her to put and keep her thoughts in steady train.

On Thursday morning, however, the two met in the hall.

Judith, having said her final good-bye to Mrs. Reece, was standing there in travelling cloak and hat, with all her boxes and belongings about her. Delphine came down the stairs brilliant in the most dainty

of morning costumes, with eyes dancing, smiles gleaming.

“Ah, let me drive you, Miss Judith,” she said winningly, “as I drove my Wolf the other day. We made the journey in fifteen minutes less than we ever did before.”

“Thank you, no. Davies will drive me,” answered Judith in unmistakably arctic tones.

“Is there then nothing—nothing I can do for you, my friend?” this with just a pretty shade of mournfulness thrown into her voice and eyes.

Judith turned and looked at her steadily.

“Yes, you can do one thing for me,” she said; “you can let me go upstairs and kiss little Bertie before I go.”

Delphine started. She was not prepared for such a request as this; yet she speedily recovered her self-control.

“The little Bertie? Ah yes, my friend, go by all means, you were always kind and good to him. You will find him in my dressing-room at play; you know the way to it.”

But she took care, however, to follow closely upon Judith's heels.

Bertie was seated on the floor playing with his nine-pins, a wooden ball was in his hand, wherewith to knock them down so soon as they should be set up in rank and file. He was, as usual, richly and daintily dressed. A light Indian-silk tunic set off to advantage the delicate shades of his transparent complexion and the bright gold of his long curls; deep falling Spanish lace shadowed his thin white arms and hid the hollows about his slender throat. He looked up as the door opened, an angry flush swept over his face as his eyes rested for one moment on Delphine, then, lifting his tiny hand with deliberate aim, he flung the wooden ball straight at her head.

"Ah, the little fury!" cried Delphine, dodging away from the ball, but she laughed pleasantly all the time, as though the child's display of temper amused rather than angered her.

Judith went up to the little fellow, and knelt on the floor by his side.

“Bertie dear,” she said softly, “look up at me. Will you give me a kiss and say good-bye to me? I am going away.”

The child’s reply was to fling his arms tightly round her neck, and press his little lips vigorously to her cheek.

“Do you love me, Bertie?” whispered Judith right into the child’s ear now.

The answer this time was an embrace so vehement, that her hat was knocked off her head, and fell to the ground.

Delphine picked it up.

“Naughty boy—naughty boy!” she cried; “you will crumple all Miss Judith’s beautiful frills and laces;” and she endeavoured to disengage the still clinging boy.

Judith, with difficulty, and a huge pain at her heart, set herself free from the child, replaced her hat and veil, and left the room.

Delphine went with her to the top of the stairs.

“Adieu, my friend,” she said sorrowfully; “we shall miss you—oh, so much. My Wolf and I will so often talk of you as we sit together outside on the terrace in the long summer evenings. Ah, my Wolf esteems you so much—so very, very much; I have seen it many, many times in his eyes as they have followed you about the room—here, there, everywhere. Going? yes. I had so much to say to you, but I will tell my Wolf to put it all in his letter when he writes. Adieu again, my friend;” here she extended both her small white hands for a farewell clasp, then recoiled a step, exclaiming: “Why, my friend, surely you are not going away without shaking hands with me!”

Judith paused a moment a few steps below her on the stairs.

“No,” she answered, looking steadily up into the brilliant, evil face, “I cannot bring myself to touch your hand,” and without another word she went slowly down the stairs into the hall.

Delphine, giving one long, low laugh,

which seemed to echo through the house like the pæan of a triumphant fiend, went back to her room.

In the hall Judith found Mr. Maurice, the land-steward, awaiting her.

“Mr. Reece said he wished me to go with you to the station, and see you into your train,” he explained, accounting for his unexpected appearance.

Bryce came forward with a huge bouquet of roses as a farewell offering. The old body said little, but she hung her head and looked troubled.

One or two of the maids who had grown to be fond of Judith shed a tear or two ; the gardener and gardener’s boy, to whom she had lent books, stood at a little distance, touching their hats.

Then crack went the coachman’s whip, the old greys—not so fat as they were a year ago—set off at a fair pace, and Judith was whirled away out of sight down the laurel-edged drive.

A yet deeper silence seemed to fall upon the house that day.

Bryce went into her dark little house-keeping room, and gave short answers to everyone who ventured to approach her. Mrs. Reece declined her luncheon and dinner, and desired Phœbe, her maid, not to speak to her unless she was spoken to. Delphine also retired into her own quarters, ordering the butler to send, at the regular hours, her meals upstairs, inclusive of dry sherry and cigarettes. Little Bertie was seen going out for and returning with Olivette from his usual morning's walk, and afterwards, as usual, disappeared for the rest of the day. As for Olivette, she had suddenly fallen into a fit of most profound sullenness, from which neither Delphine's raillery nor her petulance sufficed to arouse her.

Not till the whole household had retired to rest for the night, did she find for herself a voice and words. Even then the voice was faint and the words were few. She looked all round her in every corner, as though she feared some lurking listener, and went up to her sister, who half re-

clined, half lay, in loose muslin *peignoir*, on the bed, laid her hand upon her shoulder, and whispered into her ear:

“Give it up, Delphine; give it up. It’s a dangerous game, and will bring you to no good.”

Delphine raised herself a little higher on her elbow, stared blankly at her sister for a moment, and then burst into a reckless laugh.

“What, now, at the very last moment, give it up, when everything has fitted itself into my hand and the game is all my own? Thank you, no, my sister! If you are going to turn coward and sneak, you’ll have to do it on your own account, not on mine.”

“Why not,” pursued Olivette, in the same low, hurried voice, “content yourself with marrying Wolf and adopting the child, as he intends?”

“What about Phil Munday, who knows the secret? Is he the man, think you, to let himself be jilted, and lose the opportunity for revenge?”

“You might buy him off; you’ll have

to do so. That is part of your plan, isn't it?"

"Aye, he'll be bought off, no doubt, when he finds the case is hopeless and there's no better game to play, but not before. I know the man! Besides, so long as the boy lives, there's always the fear of my Wolf turning soft-hearted, and in a sudden fit of penitence giving back everything to him. I've seen him on the verge of it already more than once. I know that man too!"

"Well, I don't care what you know or don't know. I know this is a dangerous game, and I advise you to give it up—that's all."

"Dangerous! where's the danger?" And again she laughed wildly, recklessly. "If there were fifty thousand times more of danger in it, I should do it; if there were anything of risk in it, I should run it. But there's none—none whatever. Now, listen, my child, and I'll tell you exactly how the whole thing will be done from beginning to end, and you shall judge for

yourself how much of danger there lies in it. I go out in the afternoon, to-morrow, the little imp with me. I take also an easel and painting materials, and I say to one or other of the servants carelessly, as I pass, that I am going to paint that little bit of open glade Mr. Wolf so much admires, to surprise him on his return. Very well, I go; I plant my easel there; that is all. I leave my painting materials and camp-stool there—that is all, and I go straight back into the woods with the imp—no one ever passes there, no one will see. I take him past the stream, right on to the foot of that grey, rough mountain. I point up the steep, narrow, winding way, and I say to him, ‘Little Bertie, your mother is up there; would you like to go find her?’ Ah, how he will jump, and caper, and be off like a bird! Then I take him again by the hand, and say, ‘Do you see those dark trees, Bertie, far away up the path? Well, your mother is hiding among them. You must go up, up, up,

till you get to them; then you must crawl down on your hands and knees, part the boughs, and you'll find her.' Now, my sister, those trees spring out of a sandy hollow at the side of the rock; they branch over the path; they hide the precipice. Let one who doesn't know the road try that way—that's all! I've studied it—ah, I can't tell you how often. Well, Bertie won't get beyond those trees. I wait—I wait at the bottom of the mountain. I go a little way up; I call to him—no answer; I wait till night falls; I go back; I raise the hue and cry; I weep, I say my darling strayed away while I painted in the open glade; I say every man in the place must turn out and search. They go; they find my easel where I put it; they come back without the child, tired to death. In the morning, they say, they will search the mountains. I implore, I command that they go at once with torches. They shake their heads; I rush to the door; they rush too, and pull me back. I faint on

the floor, as I know how. Ha, how white I can make my lips when I please! All that is but rehearsal. To-morrow comes home my Wolf, and I go through it all again to perfection. Now, my child, what risk is there in all this? Tell me. Oh, not one quarter so much as I have gone through before, and thought nothing of. It is a little comedy—nothing more—a little drawing-room piece I go through to a not too clever audience. They will be interested, and pay me compliments. I laugh at them all meantime in my sleeve. What would you have more?"

Olivette, standing in front of Delphine, with folded arms and frowning brows, had listened intently to this long speech. At its end she went close to her sister, leaning over the bed.

"No," she said in low, resolute tones, "I can't go in for this. I shall start for Steve and Mexico to-morrow morning."

"You fail me at the last—coward!"

The words were hissed at Olivette as

though they had been darted at her by an adder's tongue.

"Yes, perhaps I am. I've helped you so far, because I promised, but I can't go any farther. You give me one-half your fine jewellery and a hundred pounds down for travelling expenses, and you may be quite sure I won't trouble you any more."

Five minutes of silence between the sisters. Delphine pressed her hand across her forehead; she was evidently thinking deeply.

Olivette went on:

"The whole thing has been too drawn out to please me. Your finessing is too fine for me, and to tell you the truth, I can't do what you'd do in cold blood."

Delphine drew her hand from her eyes.

"After all," she said slowly, as though she were thinking out her plans as she uttered them, "it may be the very best thing that you should go to-morrow morning. You see, if you are here it should be you, not I, who take the boy out for

a walk, whereas, if you are gone away suddenly, it follows naturally that I should take him out. Yes, I see it all. You heard from Steve yesterday. Very well, the letter was to say your mother was ill, and wished your return. I naturally, with my kind heart, send you at once. To-morrow morning, before I have my breakfast even, I will send for that old Gorgon Bryce, and tell her that she must find a nurse for me at once at Llanrhaiadr, or wherever else they are to be had. Ah, *brava*, Delphine, what a brain you have! How well it all fits in! Ah, Olivette, my child, I am very much obliged to you, after all. Yes, you shall have your hundred pounds, I can manage that, and some of my jewellery—that means the things that don't suit me, nothing in the shape of diamonds, don't expect them—but you'll have to sit up all night packing; you'd better begin at once. Don't make too much racket about it, I'm not very much inclined for sleep to-night, and if you stir about and make a clatter, I sha'n't get

a wink. Stay! I think I'll take a dose of chloral. The scent-case is at your elbow, there's the key; put me a little in that wine-glass and leave it by my bedside, so that I can take it off the last thing."

Olivette did as she was bidden.

"Does Wolf know that you and Bertha were not really sisters, only sisters in the profession?" she asked, as she drew one cut glass bottle out of the case, and prepared to unstopper it.

"He know! how should he?" answered Delphine. "Why should I tell him? It's no business of his," she broke off abruptly. "Simpleton!" she cried, making a sudden bound from the bed to Olivette's side; "don't you know chloral when you see it? There, give me the bottle! That's—— Well, no matter what that is; that's my reserve bottle, in case everything else fails me. That never can fail one in need. Now go, begin your packing, and leave me in peace for the rest of the night."

CHAPTER IX.

THE day after Judith's departure seemed an odd, blank, disjointed sort of day at Plas-y-Coed. Yet a day of events too. It began with the vehement ringing of Delphine's bell, and the request that Bryce should be sent to her at once. Bryce on entering the room was confronted by Olivette equipped for travel, by corded boxes, umbrellas, and hand-bags. Delphine, with many exclamations and regrets, related the story concocted over-night; asked if Olivette and her baggage could be driven to Pen Cwellyn in time for the early train; and wound up by asking Bryce if she could find a nurse for the little Bertie immediately, as she herself knew nothing of the

management of children, and she shuddered at the thought of her darling being neglected in ever so slight a degree. The woman must be staid and careful, clean, good-tempered, capable of washing and dressing a delicate child; in fact, must possess all the cardinal virtues, and not a few of the minor ones.

Bryce's old eyes wandered lovingly to a corner of the room where little Bertie, surrounded with toys, was trying to build himself into a castle of toy-bricks and turrets; a wall behind and before was already set up. It recalled a score or so of by-gone reminiscences to her old brain. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"If you would only allow me, ma'am," she said, "I would act as nurse to the child—till you could find a better, at any rate; I would give you my word he should not be neglected."

Delphine was equal even to this emergency.

"Ah, how kind, how good of you!" she cried, going up to the old body, and

taking her hand. "The very thing beyond all others, isn't it, Olivette?" Olivette made no reply. "Now I know my darling will be taken care of. Come here, Bertie"—Bertie, with his little frock filled with bricks, came slowly forward—"see here, my child, Bryce has been good enough to offer to be your nurse, for a time, at any rate. Go up to her now, give her your hand, and I dare say she will take you downstairs and give you some breakfast."

Bertie, with the remembrance of Olivette's warnings against the old women of the household floating in his small brain, stood still where he was, eyeing Bryce from top to toe somewhat viciously.

Bryce advanced towards him.

"Come, Master Bertie," she said, holding out her hand.

Bertie's reply was to retreat a step, upheave one of the bricks he held in his frock, and throw it with deliberate aim at the old body's eye. A second, a third, a fourth, a fifth followed in rapid succession.

Bryce made for the door backwards, shielding her face with her hands. Olivette caught the little fellow up in her arms and carried him off kicking and fighting into an adjoining room.

Delphine began to apologise.

"I don't like to say so," she said, turning to Bryce with one of her sweetest smiles; "but I fear he likes only young and pretty faces about him; he has evidently taken the matter into his own hands, and has decided you are not eligible for the office."

Bryce's answer was muttered in the most uncouth of Welsh gutturals as she quitted the room.

Translated into English, it might have run somewhat as follows: "His father, no doubt, loved young and pretty faces to his own hurt. Lord, keep him from a like fate!"

Olivette departed.

Bertie was allowed the run of the house that day under Delphine's supervision. He was taken upstairs on a visit of cere-

mony to Mrs. Reece, when the little fellow's perversity and troublesomeness were noticeable, and Delphine's forbearance and indulgence were much admired—at least, by Phœbe, for Mrs. Reece was singularly repressive and irresponsible that morning. Bertie was allowed to appear at luncheon also, sitting at Delphine's elbow, and helping himself to any dish he chose.

At the close of the meal, Delphine asked the butler if one of the servants could take her easel and camp-stool to the little open glade at the farther corner of the wood, as she was wishing to make a sketch there that afternoon.

"Mr. Wolf admired that nook, ah, so much last year. She herself thought it would make a grand picture. She only feared she would not be able to satisfy herself with her own productions, but she could but try." And with a "Come, Bertie, get ready for a lovely afternoon of play," she went upstairs to her own room.

Half an hour afterwards she and little Bertie were seen leaving the house

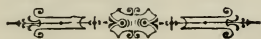
together, followed by a man-servant carrying sketching-apparatus and camp-stool. Although she did not expect one single eye to rest on her save that of squirrel or bird, Delphine was as elaborately and daintily dressed as though she were about to stand the levelling at her of a few score of critical eyeglasses in the Row or the Bois de Boulogne. Her dresses were nearly all indescribable, like herself; they seemed to indicate the most graceful of lines and curves, but with a phantasy that was difficult to follow, and an originality that was all her own. The thing she wore this afternoon was deep violet in colour, relieved here and there with a fleck of old-gold, and completed by a hat which matched in colour and material.

Bertie's dress was all of old gold, sown here and there with touches of violet. Those who saw him go out that afternoon thought how like a little fairy prince he looked in his bright attire, with his ostrich-plumed hat, and golden curls rippling beneath in the light summer breeze.

It was a glorious afternoon, hot, hazy, as became a midsummer's eve, yet, withal, kept fresh and pleasant by a soft south wind blowing off the mountains. The valley seemed full of a light golden haze. A hundred thousand song-birds were twittering in the woods.

Bertie's bright frock made a pretty bit of colour in the landscape as for a moment he paused at the garden-gates, looking up at a certain corner of the house where a pair of noisy martins were fluttering in and out from under the eaves, evidently intent upon building and setting up an establishment.

"Come, Bertie," called Delphine's clear voice a little way ahead; and the little fellow was gone.



CHAPTER X.

WOLF, whirling home to North Wales in the night-express, looked before and behind him, and asked himself a few questions. What and how much of his past must be sealed and consigned to oblivion? What and how much of his future would be his own, to mould as he would, to do with whatsoever seemed good in his own eyes?

Away from Delphine, the spell of her eyes, the magic of her presence, it was possible for him to put these questions to himself with some chance of getting a rational answer.

A rational and a practical one was what he wanted. It was of no use for his conscience to say to him, "go here," "go

there," "do this," "do that," on matters where such going and doing would be impracticable No! Such suggestions, he had long since decided, were not to be listened to, they were futile, and, no doubt, after a time would cease to be whispered in his ear. The matter before him was to decide how to make the best of things as they were, not to attempt to re-cast them in any other mould.

And here he fell to congratulating himself that, after all, things had turned out better than he had any right to expect. The woman he had so dreaded, and whom, out of sheer desperation, as the only means of stopping her rapacity and wresting her sceptre from her, he had promised to marry, was really, after all, less dangerous and far more attractive to his fancy than he would at one time have thought possible.

Then, too, that preposterous deed of hers, the bringing little Bertie upon the scene after he (Wolf) had paid such large sums to keep him away in America, had not turned out such a bad arrangement,

after all. A danger under one's eye was certainly less to be dreaded than a danger some thousands of miles away. Besides, it gave him such splendid opportunity for reparation—for more than reparation—for showering upon little Bertie, in the shape of educational and other advantages, far more than ever he had robbed him of.

Now what benefit, so his thoughts ran on, would the knowledge of his parentage and station in life confer upon this boy? He, Wolf, would take care that of not one real advantage that parentage and station could give him, should he be deprived; the knowledge of both could avail him but little. At his own death, no matter what other claims might be upon him, little Bertie should have everything given back to him, and given back to him increased and improved a hundred-fold by his kinsman's brief stewardship.

Who would be the worse for this stewardship? he asked himself fiercely, defiantly. Not Bertie, for he had just sworn that not by a hair's-breadth should

he suffer in mind, body, or estate. Not Oscar, for he had gone off to begin a new life, armed cap-à-pie as he never could have been had they all remained in their hideous poverty at the East End of London. Not Mrs. Reece, for was she not now in her old age surrounded by comforts and luxuries which all aged people needed, but which wealth alone could procure?

Why, if anybody had suffered by this deed which he had done, it was himself, and himself only, in sleepless nights and anxious days; no living soul had right to point the finger and say: "This man dragged down our souls to hell with his own."

And here there came a mist before his eyes, which, had he been a weak man and given to emotion, might have passed for tears. As it was, with his heart grown now into something of the substance and density of flint, he said to himself, "It was nothing but weariness and weakness of the eyelids, through midnight travelling and lack of sleep. For what could there be in the thought of any young

girl of twenty, least of all such a girl as Judith Wynne, to fill a man's eyes with water or set his heart aching and quaking?"

On this count, more than any other, there was cause for naught but rejoicing and thankfulness. Many men in his place, so he told himself, would have done outright what he so nearly did—have taken advantage of her girlish simplicity, her kindly sympathy, have sought and won her love, and thrown the half of his heavy burthens on her weak shoulders. Ah, thank Heaven, he had stopped short of that! He had not sullied her pure conscience with the guilty whispers of his own—nay, more, he had had strength and courage to send her away from his side to a brighter and more suitable home, where, no doubt, among congenial, light-hearted companions she would speedily shake off and forget the gloom and sadness of the past. Yes, thank Heaven! she, no more than the others, would have cause to curse him when the great day

of reckoning came. Hideous as his own soul might be, and no doubt was, it had at least kept its hideousness to itself, had not tainted any other soul with its infection. Black and vile it might be to its very core, but others had been the better, not the worse, for its blackness and vile-ness, and if it so happened that it died at last of its own plague, it would be at least the plague of a canker, a disease self-centred, for which none but itself would suffer.

These and similar ones were the thoughts wherewith he shortened his long journey home. Towards sunrise of that midsummer day he slept a little from sheer eye-weariness and bodily exhaustion. As day dawned fully over the Welsh mountains he aroused once more, and found himself entering the town of Pen Cwellyn.

He had desired that no one should send to meet him from Plas-y-Coed, meaning to take a hired fly from the railway-station. One fly was always in attendance to meet each down train, although there was but

seldom a demand for it. Pen Cwellyn was the quietest and least frequented of market-towns, it led nowhere save to Plas-y-Coed, and a stranger alighting there was looked upon somewhat as a *rara avis in terris*. However, on this particular morning, as Wolf descended from his railway-carriage and looked about him for further means of transit, he saw that such a *rara avis* had actually alighted before him, and was now making for the one little cab Pen Cwellyn could boast.

He was a stalwart-looking individual, very much muffled up about the throat, and with hat drawn rather low over his brows. As he went rapidly along the narrow footway, Wolf could only discern that he had jet-black whiskers and a noticeable row of gleaming white teeth.

CHAPTER XI.

SEVEREN o'clock on a midsummer morning; the dew not yet scared by scorching sunbeams from off moss or grassy border; the air faintly troubled by awakening flower-scents and uprising larks; many-leaved beeches and birches rustling together, as though they were telling each to the other their overnight's dreams; long grasses billowing and bending under a light scudding breeze, now flashing back a rich aqua-marine, anon "in colour like the satin-sining palm on salloos in the windy gleams of March," a quaint old house, brightened up coquettishly here and there with modern touches, standing serene and stately in the midst of it all.

In very truth, a fair midsummer picture it made. No touch of tragedy here; one could scarcely bear even to think of a dead sparrow in the glamour of this sunshiny landscape.

Yet if Wolf, as he paused at the door of his own house, had seen inscribed over the lintel those words of doom, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," or that mystic handwriting which startled the Assyrian king in the midst of his revels, it might have been better for him—might more fitly have prepared him for that which he was to see and hear when the door opened to receive him.

As it was, he started back, as though he had been met by a volley of musketry as he crossed the threshold. A woman in dark violet robes lay stretched upon the floor of the hall, her hair hanging down dishevelled, like a black silken veil, below her waist, her hands clasped and extended high above her head. Her face was death-like in its pallor, her full white eyelids were closed, and one might have

thought she slept, had not piteous moans from time to time broken from her lips. It was Delphine. Thus, in spite of all remonstrance, had she lain throughout the entire night moaning, incessantly, "Oh, my Bertie—my Bertie!" the plaint changing now to "Oh, my Wolf—my Wolf!" as the hall-door opened and she became conscious of Wolf's presence, of his standing over her in amazed silence, of his kneeling down on the floor beside her, and endeavouring to unclasp her cold, rigid hands.

The servants, in twos and threes, were standing at the lower end of the hall talking in whispers.

"She has been like this all the night through," he heard one say to the other.

"What does it all mean?" he asked, and a great fear shook his heart.

"Oh, my Wolf!" she moaned again. "Oh, my Wolf, my Wolf! how shall I tell it to you?"

"Don't try to tell me anything here," he said angrily. "Get up and go to your

own room ; or, if you feel yourself unable to move, I will carry you."

He put his arms round her waist and lifted her bodily off the floor ; then, with the help of one of the maids, little by little, they got her up the two flights of stairs to her own room and laid her on the sofa.

Safely landed here, her grief overcame her once more. She buried her face downwards in the sofa-pillows ; she beat her hands frantically together, and moaned again and again :

"Oh, my Wolf, my Wolf ! How shall I tell you !"

"Don't keep me any longer in suspense, Delphine," said Wolf in low nervous tones, for he was beginning to feel the strain beyond bearing, "Tell me right out at once. Is my mother all right ?"

"Oh, yes ! oh, yes !" sobbed Delphine ; "she is as well as ever ; she doesn't feel it as I do."

"And Judith ?" The words seemed wrung from his lips : he hated to mention

Judith's name in this beautiful, evil woman's presence, yet perforce he must. The dread of some ill having befallen her, which, lightning-like, had flashed through his brain, was a dread not to be borne voluntarily for more than a second and a half.

Delphine lifted up her white face from the pillows. For one instant there came a steely, baneful look into her dark eyes; for one instant she cursed her own folly, which had let this girl depart from the house unthreatened, uninjured.

"What should I know about her?" she said in sharp, metallic tones. "What would it matter to me what became of her? Should I lie here and weep for her, if she were dead and buried a thousand times over?"

Wolf's face grew hard as iron.

"I dare say not," he said coldly, "but others might." He paused a moment, as though mastering some strong feeling, then went on in a more conciliatory tone: "Well, now, Delphine, that you are calmer, tell me what has happened that

I may see what can be done for the best. Why are you lying here in this state?"

Delphine sobbed and moaned again.

"It's my Bertie—my darling Bertie!" she said between her gasps. "He's gone for ever. I shall never—never see him again."

"Bertie!"

The word broke from his lips in sharp, agonised accents. Then he stood motionless, rooted to the spot, all signs of human life dying out of his face.

"Aye, my Bertie!" sobbed Delphine. "He strayed away yesterday; he has been seen by no one; he is lost, or drowned, or dead. I shall never—never see him more!"

He made her no answer. He still stood there, staring at her with stony, lack-lustre eyes, spellbound, as though he had been listening to the sweet notes of Rhiannon's birds.

Delphine grew frightened at her own handiwork. What was going to happen? Were things about to take an awkward turn now?

She lifted herself languidly from the couch. She dragged herself slowly yet gracefully to his side, as one might go who was half worn out with grief and pain.

“Oh, my Wolf!” she said softly, laying her hand upon his arm. “Do not look like that at me. Speak to me one word—one little word. Ah, I did not think you loved the little one so well!”

Her voice, her touch, seemed to break the spell which bound him. He recoiled one step, shaking himself free from her.

“Back!” he said in a voice that sounded like the fall of some mighty hammer on Vulcanic anvil. “Back! Don’t touch me—stand where you are. Look in my face, and tell me what you have done with the child.”

And Delphine stood where she was, looked up in his face piteously, innocently, and said in plaintive tones:

“Done with the child? Oh, my Wolf, what can you mean? The darling strayed away yesterday while I sketched just outside the wood. I call, I search for him every-

where. I come home, I send the men out to search. They come back; they cannot find him. I know not where to send them next;" and once more she sobbed and moaned, essaying to hide her weeping face on his shoulder.

But he put her from him with iron hand.

"It's a lie!" he said in a voice growing harder with every word he uttered; "a cursed lie! You know where the child is; you have hidden him away somewhere. I will have no trifling now. I command you tell me the truth on this matter, though you lie to me about everything else under heaven."

"Oh, my Wolf, you speak to me so?" and Delphine sank on the floor beside the sofa, hiding her face with her clasped hands.

"Yes, I speak to you so—I, the man whom you have befooled to your heart's content. I speak to you so, and I mean every word I say. I tell you I will have no murder done in my house—no diabolical

cruelty practised on this child. I say I will have clean hands! Clean hands—do you hear? not bloodstained ones!”

It was once more the echo of that voice Judith had heard in the corridor in the dead of night.

“Murder! Oh, my Wolf, my Wolf!” sobbed Delphine; “you do not mean to say you think my darling is murdered?”

“I can—I do; and I say more, I dare accuse you of his murder!”

He strode to her side; he took her hands from her face, holding them both in one of his strong ones.

“Look up at me, Delphine,” he said. She did so. It was marvellous how she could stand the fire of those fierce, angry eyes. “Look up and see that I mean every word as I utter it,” he went on. “I command you to tell me what you have done with the child; where you have hidden him; in what corner of the woods or mountains he is lying now. Do you understand me?”

Delphine’s penetration had not deceived

her when she had said that this man would make a terrible master if once he got the upper hand.

She felt cowed—a little ; not much.

“Alas! my Wolf——” she began.

But Wolf stopped her, laying his other hand upon her lips.

“I want no words from you, except they be answers to my questions. Once more, and it is for the last time, I ask it. What have you done with the child? Where is he?”

Delphine’s head drooped upon her bosom.

“Alas! my Wolf, I cannot tell you,” she sighed.

Wolf let go her hands, and strode to the fireplace, giving one loud, long pull to the bell.

“Send Mr. Maurice to me at once!” was his order to the scared maid, who came running up, thinking her aid was required by Miss Delphine.

Mr. Maurice, who was in the house, quickly made his appearance.

Wolf addressed the worthy steward with peremptory abruptness.

“I want to know exactly what has been done with regard to the search for the missing boy?” he said.

“Well, sir, considering how short a time has elapsed since the child was lost, I think everything possible has been done,” answered Mr. Maurice. “A party was organised directly Miss Pierpoint returned saying the little fellow was missing, and we searched the woods till night fell, from the point where the child must have strayed. We could not attempt the mountains so late—there was no moon—but as soon as day dawned all the men round far and near formed three parties and went up three several ways.”

“Well?”

“Two parties have returned, sir, but not the third; they have nothing to report; they came upon nothing unusual anywhere.”

“Has the stream been dragged?”

“Not yet, sir, but that can be set about

at once. You see it's getting wind in the neighbourhood that the child is lost, and men keep coming from all parts offering their services."

"Very well; accept the services of every man who offers, and let them set about dragging the stream at once. Have the police been informed?"

He asked this question with eyes fixed full on Delphine's bowed face. She did not start nor shrink, however, but upturning her beautiful eyes, said softly:

"Ah, we did not think of that; we were all so shocked and bewildered."

"Well, sir, I thought of it, to tell you the truth," said the steward, "but scarcely liked to take so much upon myself in your absence."

"I will ride at once myself to Pen Cwellyn, and send over an inspector. I may not come back with him, for I shall want to go into the woods to see what the men are doing there; but see yourself that he is shown up here to hear from

this lady's own lips exactly how the child was lost."

And with this final order Wolf strode away, and in less than five minutes, breakfastless still, was in the saddle, and setting off at a good rattling pace down the rocky road to Pen Cwellyn.

It was Merlin awaking with a vengeance at last!



CHAPTER XII.

THE search for the lost boy continued all through that long midsummer day. Wolf having informed the police at Pen Cwellyn, and sent the chief-inspector into Delphine's presence, himself rode off to the woods to superintend the efforts of the searchers. Fruitless, all of them. At noon the head of one party came to him, reporting that the stream of St. Govan had been dragged from bank to bank, and save a few bits of broken fishing-tackle, and an old shoe or two, nothing had been brought to land. Party after party of the men who had been scouring the country round came back with blank, tired faces, and no tidings of any sort. Wolf was always

there to receive them, he remained in the saddle the whole day, eating nothing, saying never a word, staring with wild eyes at every man who approached him, as though he would read the news he had to bring before his tongue had time to speak it. From post to post he wandered, his heart, a thousand times that day, torn with wild, impossible hopes, with equally wild, impossible terrors.

At one time he could have sworn he heard afar off a wailing, pitiful cry as of a small child hiding amid the brush-wood, and pushing forward to the spot with a terrible eagerness, out would flutter a dismal corncrake, or wild, piping finch. At another his strained eyeballs, discerning the approach of some distant wood-cutters, would picture in their arms the dead body of the little Bertie, with torn blood-stained clothing, and draggled, unkempt hair. In that one long midsummer day he seemed to live a life-time twice told, he passed and repassed from youth, with fiery blood and courage, though middle life to

old age ; once and again he could feel the life dying out of him inch by inch, the blood thinning in his veins, the spirit within him dwindling and quenched.

Those who saw him, who, not all-absorbed in their work of searching, had time to note his anguish, his fierceness, his despair, pitied him, and sympathised with him as they never had sympathised before. Wolf had not, since his coming to Plas-y-Coed, been a popular man among his neighbours ; this sorrow, however, and the way in which he bore it, drew many to him who had hitherto held themselves aloof. The loss of a child touched a chord of some sort in every heart ; it was a grief which every man, woman, and child in the community might some day, in some fashion or other, be called upon to endure. It made hearts at one with his, who had hitherto never dreamed such sympathy possible.

The day wore away. Five o'clock found men talking together in twos and threes debating what next could be done. It

found Wolf sick and giddy, reeling in his saddle, and thanking a farmer's lad who stood by for a drink of water from a tin can which he held in his hand.

"You'd best go home, sir," said old Davies, who had come out in search of him; "the mistress has been asking for you all day long, and wondering whether you have had aught to eat or drink, and, sir, some of the men who have been searching the mountain have just come in, and have something to say to you."

Wolf turned his horse's head towards home immediately, all sorts of wild surmises fleeting through his brain. Standing just outside the door were some four or five stalwart-looking men, all talking in earnest, low tones to each other in Welsh.

One, who appeared to be acting as chief among them, came forward, fumbling in his waistcoat-pocket. He said he did not know whether what he had found would be of any use in the matter, but thought it as well to bring it to the house. He then

produced a small fragment of white Spanish lace.

Wolf shook like an aspen leaf, he could scarcely command his voice to ask where it had been found.

The man explained that he had discovered it caught in some brushwood a little way up the mountain passage which led out of the wood.

This was the least frequented of the three roads leading up the mountains. It was a deceptively dangerous passage, presenting for the first hundred yards or so simply the appearance of a steep pleasant footway—nothing more. Step by step, almost imperceptibly, the dangers grew upon one; here the path suddenly narrowed, and was encumbered by huge boulders and gigantic fragments of rock; there it as suddenly shelved, and with a sharp turn skirted the edge of a deep precipice, from whose sandy sides sprang a few mountain trees which concealed without lessening the danger of the chasm. Just before, however, this precipice was reached, there were a few

clumps of stunted furze and broom, and it was in these that the fragment of white lace had been discovered.

Wolf looked at it for a few minutes, then he said a little hoarsely:

“Fetch the inspector here; he had better see this.”

The inspector came, and the lace was handed over to him.

“Miss Pierpoint is the only person in the house who can say for certain whether it belonged to the child or not,” said Wolf.

The inspector at once offered to take the lace for Miss Pierpoint’s inspection.

He returned in a few moments, saying that Miss Pierpoint was certain the lace was little Bertie’s, and that the child had worn a frock trimmed with it when he had gone out yesterday. He added that the young lady had been greatly overcome by the sight of it.

“The precipice must be searched at once,” said Wolf.

Even as he said this he grew sick and

giddy again, almost falling forward on his horse's neck.

Mr. Maurice brought him some brandy.

"Sir, you must give in for to-day," he said. "You have eaten nothing. You have all day been riding about in this scorching sun. I will give orders about having the precipice thoroughly searched. There are plenty of men here who are only too anxious to be of use, and who will begin the work at once."

Wolf with difficulty got himself out of the saddle, and went into the house. The butler came forward to tell him that refreshments were laid for him in the dining room, but he waved him on one side impatiently. The old man followed him, saying that Mrs. Reece had been sending messages for him all day and was most anxious to see him. But Wolf went past him as though he had heard him not, straight into his own study, shutting the door behind him.

Almost mechanically he took his usual seat at his writing-table, then he fell for-

ward, bowing his head upon it with one heavy groan.

“My God!” he moaned bitterly, “have mercy! My punishment is greater than I can bear.”

Self-branded, he sat there with the cry of Cain upon his lips.

For a few moments a mist and blank seemed to fall upon him. His brain felt stupefied, inert, incapable. Little by little, however, it cleared. Thoughts began to form in it, visions of the past to come slowly forth and confront him; spectres of the present to troop forth till they gathered together a goodly company around him.

This, then, was the end to which his sin, step by step, had led him! This was to be the result of his many sleepless nights, his weary, painful days, his strivings against the voice of conscience, his resistance to the pleadings of his good angel, his toilsome building up of philosophic and ethical bulwarks, his resolute determination in so far as in him lay to repair the evil he had wrought by a lifetime's devotion to the one

he had wronged. This—this the result, to see all swept and whirled away in a moment like a dry leaf upon the flood, and the awful guilt of blood-shedding brought home to his very door!

One more exceeding bitter cry escaped his lips, and then he bowed his head again and wept passionately.

Not as a child ; not the sort of tears that women weep—easy-flowing, heart-lightening ; not the summer shower that gives promise of sunshine breaking forth presently from behind the dark cloud. No ! Men such as Wolf Reece know not tears of that sort. When they weep it is once for all in a lifetime, and the tears they shed are not healing, nor burden-lifting, but bitter, burning, scorching things, which sear as they fall ; which tell a tale of wounds never to be healed, of hope burnt out, and retribution at hand, as sure, as inevitable, as final as death itself.

Thus he wept.

For how long he knew not. The

sunbeams slanted, the shadows lengthened ; outside, on field and mountain, there lingered enough of light to enable men who knew every square inch of the ground to continue their search for little Bertie, but within the old Grange the grey twilight had deepened into night itself.

There came a gentle knock at Wolf's door, and, though he heeded it not, the handle turned, and Delphine came in. Her entrance was silent and stealthy as that of a moth's flight into a dark room. Not a footfall nor flutter of skirt stirred the air. Wolf did not know of her presence till she stood by his side, twined her arms round his neck, laid her cheek upon his bowed head, and moaned pitifully.

"Oh, my Wolf, my Wolf, you are breaking my heart!"

He started from his chair as though an adder had stung him, recoiling a step from her.

"Go!" he said in a choking voice. "For your own sake, don't come near me, to-night at any rate."

The room was too dark for her to see the wild glitter in his eye.

“For my own sake—oh, my Wolf, what do you mean?” and again she essayed to twine her arms about him.

“Stand back!” he said in a voice of thunder. “What—do you not know a desperate man when you see him?”

Something in his voice cowed her. She stood still and silent for a few seconds surveying him.

In those few seconds she measured her danger, its possibilities, its probabilities. Truly things had turned out other than she had expected. Her fascinations evidently had lost their cunning, or else—more likely—the material upon which they had been wont to operate had suffered change of substance. Well—easy remedy enough—other forces must be brought to bear upon it.

The clay had been transformed into iron; no use trying to mould that—it must be heated, beaten, forced into “shape and use.”

“My Wolf,” she said, altering her tone from that of a single string to a trichord,

“you speak roughly, rudely; you forget you are talking to a woman.”

“Can you wonder if I forget you are a woman? Have you not yourself already forgotten the fact?”

The words were spoken slowly, sternly, incisively. Delphine, as she listened, said to herself that it was high time she buckled on her armour and took her weapons in hand.

“You forget something else beside, my Wolf—you forget the bond there has been—there is between us. You are ungrateful, my friend. Ah, what have I not done for you? and here you are, all in a moment, wanting to forget everything! Once it was not so. You were grateful enough; you gave thousands when I asked for hundreds. I asked for your friendship, you gave me more—your true eternal love. Is this truth, my friend—is this love eternal? Now, what have I done, I ask, that you requite me thus?”

Wolf was at bay now.

“What have you done, do you ask?” he cried in a voice that gall itself might have

been wrung out of. "I will tell you what you have done—robbed me of my honour, my truth, my honesty, made me hateful in my own eyes, despicable in the sight of every living human being, dragged my soul down to hell, and would keep it there with your own hands if it were not that the devil himself has got hold of it now and doesn't require your services any longer.

Delphine did not smile at him now, according to her wont; it might be she thought, her smiles might lack their usual power over him in this frame of mind; or it might be she thought, the room was too dark to show them to their best advantage.

So she contented herself with saying quietly and with tightening lips:

"My Wolf, do you defy me?"

"Yes!" was his reply, thrown back at her in fierce, deep-chested tones. "I defy you a hundred times over. You have done your worst—your very worst. What remains to be done—what by any possibility

you may do can be but child's play now. You may ruin my reputation. What is that when my honour is gone? You may set men on to prosecute and imprison me for the wickedness I have wrought. What is that when I feel that eternally God's wrath will be upon me, that for me there will be no place for repentance, let me seek it never so earnestly, in this world nor any other."

His words for once made her tremble. Yet, as she stood there facing the man in the rapidly-darkening room, some new, unknown chord in her nature seemed touched; something—could it be a feeling akin to reverence?—flitted through her soul for him, standing thus beaten, baffled, at bay; making one last struggle to free himself from the web of iniquity she had meshed about him.

However, the chord, though touched, had no vibration, but passed quickly "into silence out of sight." She went back rapidly enough to the matter in hand.

"My Wolf," she said, "I have no wish

to do any one of these things you speak of. You misunderstand me altogether; you say hard things of me, of yourself, my friend. Now, be reasonable; let us talk quietly. Why should you make all this hue-and-cry about a small child who is nothing in the world to you, whom you were quite content should be put quietly on one side for your interests, whom, should the men searching outside bring back to you alive and well, you would find very much in the way, and would send upstairs to a nursery, to live there, out of sight, a dependent on your bounty?:"

"No such thing," broke in Wolf with savage vehemence, and lifting his hand on high. "God is my witness! In the future, to the very end of my life, not one penny of that child's fortune will I touch. I know—you know that repentance of mine now will avail me nothing—you nothing, for God's curse is on us both for the sin we have wrought; but should that boy ever be brought back to us alive, I swear, by all that is holy and righteous, on my

knees, before all the world, I would give back to him every penny of which I have robbed him."

He finished his sentence in a loud, passionate ring. What recked he of listeners, a desperate man in a desperate mood? Delphine might well shrink back from him a step or two into the darkness.

The door opened at this moment, softly, lingeringly; it let in a long stream of yellow light from outside lamps, which had been lighted. It cut the dark room in two; it put distance between Wolf and Delphine; they looked across it one into the other's face, she into his fierce, desperate eyes, he into her evil, glittering ones. Then they each turned and faced a dark figure which stood like some silent angel in the midst of the yellow gleam.

It was Judith, with little Bertie clinging tightly round her neck!

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR a moment there was silence among them. Wolf, drawing a long breath, staggered against the wall of the room, and, incapable of speech, with staring, stony eyes, gazed upon the two. Delphine came one step forward, with something of a crouching panther step. She was not pleasant to look upon at that moment, and a poignard might have been a very ugly weapon in her hand.

Judith was the first to speak. Her face was deathlike in its pallor, but her voice calm and passionless as might have been that of one of Guido's saints.

"I have brought back the child whom you plotted to murder," she said, slightly, turning to Delphine.

Then she crossed the room, and stood in the darkness by Wolf's side.

"Here," she said, "is the boy to whom not a moment ago you promised restitution and reparation."

Delphine began to re-muster her forces. Was this to be a final defeat, or simply a rout?

"I plotted to murder!" she exclaimed in accents of surprise. "Oh, Miss Judith, Miss Judith, why do you hate me so? What have I done that you should pursue me in this way with slander and calumny? Is it because I have crossed you in your love-making that you bring these terrible charges against me?"

"Hush!" said Judith peremptorily. "Do not attempt to deny it. Do not add lies to your wickedness. I slept in the house on Thursday night, in the Tapestry Room. In the passage that runs at the back of your bedroom I stood for hours. I heard every word of your shameful plot, and took my own measures to defeat it."

Judith *victrix* at last!

But Delphine was not one to throw up her arms and cry *misericordia* while there remained a ghost of a chance of turning the tide of battle.

She gave the lowest, longest, most mirthless laugh of which she was capable. She even clapped her hands together softly, as one, kid-gloved, might applaud at a theatre.

"A brave story, Miss Judith!" she cried, "a story everyone in all the world would believe! You go into a room that is bricked up and cannot be entered; you hear me speak words I never uttered! It is a delightful mystery, my friend!" and once more her scornful laugh trilled forth.

"It is no mystery at all. Bryce will tell you how I entered that room if you ask her," answered Judith calmly; "it can all be easily explained if you wish for an explanation. On Thursday, when I went away from here, I went only so far as to the next station, returned to Pen Cwellyn at night-fall, and walked back to this

house. Then I went straight up to the Tapestry Room by a side staircase, heard your plot, went out again, feeling and finding my way into the woods. There I stayed till day dawned. Then I made my way up the mountain-side."

"A brave story——" began Delphine again.

"Hush—sh!" said Wolf authoritatively, though his voice sounded terribly out of tune and unlike his own. "Go on, Judith," he added, turning to the young girl.

So Delphine contented herself with another, and another of her long, low laughs. Yet even as she laughed her plans were forming.

Judith went on:

"I lay hidden all day long among the brushwood. In the late afternoon came little Bertie up the mountain looking for his mother"—here she turned and faced Delphine. "He found me instead hidden among the gorse, this side of the deep precipice."

"And then?" queried Wolf in the same

unnatural tone of voice, drawing almost involuntarily nearer and nearer to where Judith stood.

Bertie had all this time lain quiescent in Judith's arms; as, however, he saw Wolf approaching, though only by a step, he clenched his tiny fist, and tried to aim a blow at his face.

Wolf shrank back; he felt a coward now before the uplifted hand of this small child.

Judith went on:

"I kept him there safe and out of sight till night began to fall; then in the darkness I brought him back to the house." She paused.

"Go on; what then?" said Wolf.

"I brought him back into the Tapestry Room, giving him the food Bryce was good enough to bring up to me. He has been in that room the whole of this day."

"You—you—you did this?" exclaimed Wolf, a terrible twanging harshness making itself heard in his voice.

He was silent a moment, weighing the

enormous physical strain that this young girl had endured voluntarily during the past two days; against this he fell to measuring the fearful mental strain he himself had sustained throughout the past twelve hours."

"And all the time I was enduring this awful torture and agony the child was safe with you, and might have been produced at any moment. Judith, Judith, was this well done?" and here his voice rang out sharply, passionately.

"It was well done."

"What, to keep me agonised, tortured, suffering, my brain racked, my senses almost leaving me, my heart well-nigh broken?"

"It was well done, I say," answered Judith loudly, clearly, her voice as decisive as his own in his best days, "and I would do it over again to-morrow if it had to be done. I would rack your brain, I would break your heart a thousand times over sooner than have it hard, stubborn, callous, as it has been in the days gone by."

“You would do this—you?”

“Aye, I would do this. I have done it to-day; I would do it again to-morrow should the need arise.”

Wolf opened his lips as though about to speak, then he caught back his breath with a gasp, saying nothing.

“Hear her! She threatens you, my Wolf!” said Delphine softly.

“I do,” said Judith, once more turning round and confronting the woman. “So far as he shows mercy to himself, so far will I have none for him. I will be pitiless so far as he shows himself pity.”

“I am not likely to do that now, Judith,” said Wolf in low, unnatural tones.

Then, somehow, he pulled himself together, quitted the room with lagging, uncertain steps, crossed the hall, and went out into the warm, hazy darkness.

Delphine for one instant faced Judith.

“Adieu, sweet Miss Judith,” she said softly, making her the lowest and most profound of curtseys. “I congratulate-

late you on your day's work. 'It was well done, and fitting for a princess the daughter of so many kings.' But others, perhaps, can do better than well Be warned. 'When clouds are seen wise men put on their cloaks.' Shall I lend you one, Miss Judith? The game isn't quite ended yet. It may be 'double,' it may be 'quits,' between us the next throw. We shall see. Adieu, my sweet young friend. I kiss your hand!"

Then, making another elaborate curtsy, she turned and went out after Wolf into the night.



CHAPTER XIV.



OUTSIDE in the dark garden the air was hot and still, not the faintest breath of wind stirred leaf or twig. There was no moon ; black, murky clouds hung low, as though resting on the very tops of the sombre beeches. The garden seemed literally walled and ceiled by beech and cloud.

Surveyed from the terrace-steps, where Delphine stood for a few moments, it seemed like some dismal cavern, a Dom-Daniel, perhaps, "lying under the roots of the Ocean," and containing all sorts of hideous possibilities and sorceries.

There was evidently a storm coming on. Now, if there were one thing which Delphine dreaded more than any other, it

was a thunderstorm. Only next to apparitions and ghosts she ranked the evil things, thunder and lightning.

During a storm, her usual refuge was a dark cupboard or cellar, and one seeking her there would have found her, while the tempest lasted, ready and willing to fall down and worship eagle, sea-calf, or laurel—anything, in fact, that ancient or modern wisdom had put upon a pinnacle. Her senses on the matter of thunder and lightning were peculiarly sharpened and intensified, and she was wont to declare she could smell a storm on its road when it was a hundred or so of miles away.

So now, as she stood for a moment locking down the dark avenues and up again at the inky sky, it occurred to her how much nicer and pleasanter it would be if she could get Wolf back into the house, and have her little talk with him between four solid walls of stone masonry, instead of out there, amid the shifting, deepening shadows of the trees.

“Wolf—my Wolf!” she called softly.
“Wolf, Wolf—my Wolf!”

But not the faintest vibration stirred the air. Stillness, hot, hazy darkness everywhere—nothing more.

Well, there was no help for it. See him she must and would that night. It was of first and final importance. It meant, in fact, to her all the difference between a safe, leisurely, comfortable retreat and a helter-skelter rout and flight. That was all.

It would be difficult in this grimy darkness to find him, no doubt. He might possibly have gone wandering out into the fields or woods. He was just in the frame of mind to do unpleasant, unheard-of things. Well, if so, all she could do would be to wait at the gate till he returned.

He must come back some time or other. It would be tedious, it would be disagreeable, no doubt, but it was one of those tedious, disagreeable things there was no getting out of: like the paying of bills or the taking of nauseous medicine, it

simply must be done. First, however, she would make the round of the garden and shrubberies; he might be hiding himself somewhere among the laurels in the darkness.

Her thoughts came to a sudden ending. Hark! what was that noise somewhere on her right hand? A sob, a groan was it? For a moment she listened intently. It sounded again, though more faintly. Ah, it must be Wolf, and not far away, either. It seemed to come from that huge beech-tree half-way down the gravelled walk. And with something of a gleam of satisfaction—born of the thought that the Fates were still fighting on her side—parting her lips and lighting her eyes, she went softly and slowly down the terrace-steps and out into the laurel-walk beyond, looking right and left as she went along.

A graceful, lissom figure she looked, gliding in and out among the shrubs. Delphine was always scrupulously—daintily-attired, but never more so than on this day of bewildering hopes and fears.

She had taken much pains with her toilette before she had faced Wolf in his study, and not one fold, one ribbon of it was disarranged now. She had on a robe of some soft satiny material, a pale carnation in colour. In make it closely followed the lines of her slender yet well-rounded figure, expressing as well as draping it. Her eyes were very brilliant that night, her colour almost hectic. Seen thus gliding in and out among the dark, shining laurels, pausing a moment to listen for a faint echo of sound, anon calling softly, sadly, "My Wolf—oh, my Wolf!" one might have fancied her a "mournful *Ænone*, wandering forlorn," and seeking her Paris amid the shadows of Mount Ida, or a love-lorn Dido in quest of her *Æneas* among Carthaginian groves.

Under the huge beech-tree there had been of late fixed a rustic garden-seat; on this, with head bowed on his clasped hands, Wolf was seated. Just before a bend in the path brought the dark outlines of his figure into sight, Delphine paused, and,

taking out the big gold Tuscan pin which fastened up her knot of jet-black hair, let the whole fall *en masse* to her waist like some great silken mat. She shook it out into careless ripples, dishevelled it a little about her ears. It shadowed somewhat the bright carmine in her cheeks, and gave her a forlorn, pathetic appearance, which she knew added another dart to her quiver. Also, it would be likely to impress upon a beholder the fact of her womanhood—of her young womanhood—another and yet more dangerous weapon, she knew.

Her footfall was so light he could not have heard her tread; his instinct alone must have warned him that danger was at hand. He drew his hands from his haggard face and started to his feet.

“What is this? What is this?” he cried in loud, startled tones. “Why do you pursue me? Go at once, in Heaven’s name! I have no wish to hurt you.”

Delphine’s hand was on his arm,

her dark, beautiful face uplifted to his in a moment.

"My Wolf," she said sorrowfully, "you bid me go—where am I to go? You turn me out of your house in Heaven's name, but it is not to heaven you would send me. No, better let me stay here, and the police come for me and hang me to please your Judith."

Wolf winced.

"You came from somewhere," he said, but in not quite so firm a tone as before. "Whence you came, thither get you back. No one here will hunt you down."

"No one! Oh, my Wolf!"

"No one, I say—no one!" reiterated Wolf.

"Not even that white-faced, pale-blooded girl who, not five minutes ago, came and stood between us, and threatened you, my Wolf, with vengeance? Do you think she would spare me?"

Wolf made no reply. Delphine went on:

"Now tell me, my Wolf, what think

you has made her play the part she has : hide herself in the house, hide herself on the mountain, bring back home a boy whom no one wanted here? Think you it was love for the small boy whom just, once, twice, three times she had seen and kissed? Ah no. It was hatred of me, my Wolf, because I had out-rivalled her and won your love. Only that—nothing else. She has loved you as girls love for the first time in their lives. I have seen it—I saw it in her face the first day I set foot in your house, and I saw it in her face to-night when she came in and stood between us!”

“Stop!” said Wolf with an almost savage vehemence. “I will not have such words as these spoken, even out here in the darkness. Am I altogether cast in iron? Can I stand here listening to your wild talking, and not lose my reason?”

Her words affected him in a way she had not dreamed. It was like showing a drowning man a coil of good rope

safely stowed away out of his reach ; or like the last glimpse of the garden of Eden which Adam caught betwixt the flaming, shifting swords of the cherubim as he toiled wearily adown the dusty, forlorn footway.

Delphine in an instant saw the mistake she had made, and retrieved it.

“She loves you, my Wolf, and she hates me for winning you. I must say it ; it is true. But her love is not the love I have had to give you. No ! She would love you, and keep to you so long as you were respectable, so long as you held your place in the county, and did not break any one of the ten commandments. But you turn thief, murderer, villain ! Ah, she will shake you off as though you were a viper ! ‘So far as you show mercy to yourself so far will I have none for you ’” (here she mimicked Judith’s voice and manner to the life). “No, my friend, when you turn villain, and are out at elbows, it is to the Delphines, not to the Judiths, you must go !”

Wolf was sorely troubled, he sank down on the seat once more, putting one hand before his eyes. Yet it was not Delphine's voice which wrought all this turmoil and pain in his heart, but rather the echo of Judith's words: "In so far as you show yourself mercy, so far will I have none for you." It was like the sounding of a true, clear note to a man who had once been a lover of music, but who now through physical incapacity could not touch string nor key.

Delphine drew a little nearer to him now with each word she spoke.

"Think you, my Wolf," she went on, "that out of love to you, to save you a pain, that girl would herself do a bad deed? Not she! Would she have dared, as I have, everything—everything for her lover? Ah, my Wolf, she loves in her own way, but not in mine. Your Delphine would risk her soul to give the man she loves a five minutes of pleasure. She has tried to do it and has failed!"

Her words ended in a sort of sob;

she sank down on the seat by his side as she uttered them. Her warm breath fanned his cheek, her silk matted hair somehow swept itself over his shoulder.

Wolf lifted up his face in an agony.

“Great Heavens, Delphine!” he exclaimed in a voice of horror, “you don’t mean to say you attempted this deed of wickedness for me—for my sake? Great God! what depths of iniquity I have dragged you down into.” And he groaned aloud.

“My Wolf, I would do it all over again to-morrow, even though it failed all over again,” murmured Delphine, laying her hand softly upon his arm, her head upon his shoulder.

“Hush, hush! You cut me to the heart,” groaned Wolf.

In very truth this seemed to the man the hardest, bitterest blow of all. In his fiercest self-accusations it had never for one moment crossed his mind that Delphine’s iniquities might in this way be laid at his door.

“My Wolf, I will say it no more! I can speak, and I can be silent. You will see! When she drags me, as she will, before the police, I will say to them, ‘Yes, I tried to do it because I wanted the house—the land to be all my own. My Wolf knew nothing of it. He is innocent; I am guilty.’ You will see!”

“Now, this is nonsense—sheer, contemptible nonsense!” said Wolf angrily, though his hands were gentle enough as he freed his arm and shoulder from her clinging embrace. “I can stand it no longer, my brains are going. The truth of it is, Delphine, I am too much shaken to contend with you, or even talk the matter over with you. You must simply do as I tell you; get away from here as soon as it is light to-morrow, and never attempt to see or speak to me again. You must understand everything is at an end between us.”

“My Wolf, I will never leave you—never give you up!”

“Delphine, you must go!” Slowly,

distinctly, and with iron force, he spoke the words.

“My Wolf, if I go, you must go with me!” She whispered the words softly, winningly into his very ear.

Wolf started. A new temptation was to beset him now.

Delphine’s long veil of hair somehow swept across his breast. She looked sweetly up into his face.

“My Wolf,” she murmured again, “say, what is there to keep you here now? Your house, your land, will be taken away from you; your name made a byword in the county. Think you there will be found bishop bold enough to give you even a living of three hundred a year? Are you meaning to go back to your curacy at the East of London?”

Wolf drew a long breath.

“For Heaven’s sake, tempt me no more, Delphine!” he implored in an agonised tone.

“Is it a temptation? It seems to me deliverance I offer you,” she said sweetly.

“Let us go away together, my Wolf, this night, before anyone can stop us. Everything is swept away from you here, you have no home—no profession—a tarnished name! Come away with me to Paris, Montreal—where you will. I will show you where to live—how to live. Ah, I know! I will sing, and act, and get money—ah, ever so much. It will be a life worth living. Come, my Wolf—say you will come!” and once more her head drooped on his shoulder.

“In so far as you show yourself mercy, so far I will have none for you.” Judith’s voice at that moment seemed to repeat the words in his very ear. Would she, so he asked himself, have counselled him thus to flee from the punishment his own sin had brought upon him? Would she not rather have stood in front of him, and said: “If only by fire your sin can be purged, stand there and endure the hottest of the flames.”

He rose to his feet, putting Delphine away from him gently but resolutely.

“I say you must go at daybreak, Delphine, and go you must. I will have no more said on the matter.”

At this moment there came a long, low growl of approaching thunder. The mountains echoed it, ekeing out the peal to nearly double its length. There followed a soft rustling among the boughs overhead, as though a breeze had risen up and whispered among the leaves to warn them of a coming storm.

Delphine clung to him in simple abject terror.

“Oh, my Wolf—my Wolf!” she cried; “save me, save me! Ah, the terrible lightning!” And as one brilliant flash played across the sky she hid her face in his breast, trembling from head to foot.

“Come into the house,” said Wolf; “there is no danger;” and he tried to draw her along the path towards the house.

But she clung to him, impeding his steps, called him her dear and dearest Wolf,

implored him not to leave her ; besought him again and again to take care of her. Whom had she in the world but him, her own—her very own ? If he forsook and gave her up, where in the wide world could she turn for protection ?

And through it all, over it all, flashed the lightning, crashed the thunder, and soughed low over their heads a mournful wind.



CHAPTER XV.



ONE by one the lights in the Grange disappeared. No one knew of Wolf's and Delphine's absence from the house, save Judith, who had seen them depart. Mrs. Reece had been told by her maid (who was herself under that impression) that Mr. Wolf had gone to his room for the night; and though the old lady felt not a little sore at heart that he had not so much as greeted her since his return, she said to herself that, all things considered, perhaps it was for the best. She felt disturbed and agitated after the terrible anxiety the day had brought. He, no doubt, felt the same; and to-morrow would find them all stronger in body, clearer in mind, and better able to look the

mystery, or rather succession of mysteries which had occurred, in the face.

For that there was a great deal of mystery behind it all, she was compelled, howsoever unwillingly, to admit.

Of Bertie's heirship to the estate, of his kinship to Wolf, she knew nothing. It seemed to her that Wolf had been most unnaturally disturbed by the loss of the child ; she could only trace his anxiety on Bertie's behalf to a deeper, fonder feeling for Delphine than she had accredited him with, and which, to say truth, under the circumstances not a little surprised her. Possibly the greatest mystery in the affair to her mind was Judith's sudden return to the house, and appearance with little Bertie in her arms. From Wolf's study she had gone straight to Mrs. Reece's room, presenting herself without one word of explanation.

In reply to all questions, she had simply said :

"Dear Mrs. Reece, ask me nothing to-night, I implore you. To-morrow Wolf will tell you everything himself."

Then, as little Bertie steadily refused to be on amicable terms with the old lady, Judith had thought it best to carry him off to her own room, where, laid on her bed, the little fellow very quickly fell fast asleep; and, sitting down by the bedside, she had watched her darling.

To know Judith thoroughly, one must see her with a child in her arms. A love for the weak and helpless among God's creatures was with her at once an instinct and a passion. Now, as she sat watching the little sleeping Bertie, she felt—as any mother might—all in one breath, fierce and watchful, tender and protective. For him she had felt willing to risk her life, and would have done so, had the need arisen, without a second thought on the matter. Saved and rescued now, her feeling was she must devote her life to him. Through good or ill, through difficulty or danger, she would do—well, her utmost for him. And “utmost” with Judith meant, perhaps, a little more than it does with most people.

Then the storm had crashed over the house, and she had gone to the window wondering whether Wolf had come in, and when and how they would meet on the morrow.

There followed another "riot of feeling." The "when" mattered but little; sooner or later the meeting must come; the "how" was the thing that set her heart aching and quaking. How would he face the difficulties that beset him? How would he comport himself? As penitent or as himself the wronged one? In what relationship would he stand now towards Delphine? Was his love for her the true, vital thing that compels a man to stand by a woman through sin and disgrace even till the last hour of his life; or was it after all but the flimsy pretence of love, which dissolves like ice before fire at the first rude shock it receives.

In all this range of thought it will be seen she, herself, occupied but a small space; a space so small indeed as to be almost infinitesimal. Her path was clear,

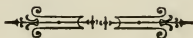
her line of conduct was marked out with lines sharp as flint could mark it. This man had never asked her love, but somehow, without pretence of love-making, he had won it. There it was, his for ever, for time and for eternity. Word of love might never to the end of their lives be spoken between them, it would make no difference; her love had been given once for all, and could never be withdrawn. She looked for no result to this love; she never for one moment expected that she and Wolf would stand side by side as man and wife. No, the only hope her love had given rise to had been the hope of saving him from himself; from the evil consequences of his one departure from the path of right. She would save the thing she loved, not that she might possess and wear it as some precious jewel richly set, but simply and solely because salvation meant all that was holy, beautiful, rare, and worth having to the thing itself, as opposed to all that was worthless, marred, dishonourable, distorted.

All this time the storm was steadily increasing in violence, the wind coming and going in low, sobbing gusts. It was a grand sight. Now and again the sharp turrets and peaks of the grey mountains stood out clear and distinct in livid light, while forest and field below lay steeped in ink-black darkness; anon the mountains showed black and dim, while field and forest were for the moment ablaze with fleeting flame. As she stood thus surveying the all-but-supernatural beauty of the landscape, there came a sudden terrific flash, which seemed to spend itself on the garden immediately beneath the window, lighting up every bowery corner, every tree, shrub, flower with its scintillating blaze, and showing to Judith's straining eyes a sight she would have given worlds to shut out from them: a tall, dark figure, with stooping shoulders and bare head, standing in the gravelled pathway, midway between the house and the shrubbery, and holding in his arms, and, as it seemed to her, close to his heart, a woman clad in

light summer dress, with a long black veil of hair streaming below her waist.

Judith left the window immediately, and went back to Bertie's side.

The rest of the night she spent on her knees.



CHAPTER XVI.

HAD Judith been by Wolf's side at the moment when the lightning revealed him to her, she might have heard him saying to Delphine in peremptory tones:

“Delphine, Delphine, rouse yourself, for Heaven's sake! How am I to get you to the house if you cling to me in this way.”

And she might have heard Delphine's low, sobbing reply:

“Oh, my Wolf, my Wolf, who shall I cling to if not to you?”

And then her clinging, her tears, her piteous exclamations, had redoubled.

Wolf looked all round him despairingly. The house was still some hundred yards or

so distant. His burthen was not a heavy one, but it was nevertheless a difficult and unmanageable one. Had Delphine lost her senses he might better have succeeded in getting her to the house, simply carrying her with one or two pauses by the way. As it was, however, what with her clingings and exclamations, and the weakness and dizziness he felt slowly creeping over him, the task was beyond him. The terrific strain he had endured throughout the day, his long abstinence from food, was beginning to tell upon him. The man's soul had been rent and torn till it held itself together merely by threads and shreds. His brain seemed whirling; his legs staggered under him; his arms trembled beneath their load.

He looked right and left of him. Midway between the house and where he stood, a little on his right hand, was the smoking-pavilion, over whose decoration and furnishing Delphine had expended such a vast amount of time and thought; thus far, possibly, by making a huge effort, he

might contrive to get her. So, half-leading, half-carrying, he made the attempt, and somehow achieved it. He got her under shelter, he laid her on the couch just within the door, and himself stood bare-headed outside, braving the storm. Better a thousand times, so he said to himself, risk all Heaven's thunderbolts, than another half-hour of this brilliant, false woman's fascinations.

Delphine must have fainted as he laid her down, otherwise it is inconceivable that she should have given him even a brief five minutes' respite from her beseechings and allurements.

Little by little the storm ebbed, paler and fainter grew each flash, more distant and muffled each peal. It was not, however, till the darkness began to lift, and grey dawn to streak the east, that it entirely subsided.

Delphine had lain, white and motionless, on her couch, and Wolf had stood outside the pavilion door throughout the remainder of that short summer night.

If only one of those grand, bright flashes of flame had struck him with death as he stood, he thought, what divine mercy it would have been! Yet, so he asked himself, what right had he to expect mercy, human or divine? And, again, Judith's voice sounded in his ears:—

“In so far as you show mercy to yourself, so far will I have none for you.”

These were the words beyond any other this man had need to hear. The cries and beseechings of a weak woman praying him to repent and atone, would have fallen unheeded on his ear; but these stern words of condemnation seemed to rouse him from his stupor, shut out all thoughts of self-pity from his heart, showed him what she expected of him—what her ideal of repentance was, whose soul naught but the highest ideals could satisfy.

He watched the great red sun slowly rise from behind the mountains; he watched the grey mists, one by one, creep away like evil ghosts from field and fen; he saw, through a break in the trees which shut

the garden in, the deep green valley filling with a soft golden light.

One by one he heard throstle and black bird piping to its fellows in the wood a glad good-morning; then he went into the pavilion, and stooping over Delphine, endeavoured to arouse her.

“It is morning now,” he said. “Come, Delphine, rise and go into the house; you must get away from here before people begin to ask questions.”

Delphine opened wide her beautiful eyes.

“You send me away! Oh, my Wolf!”

Then she closed them again wearily.

Wolf felt unequal to another struggle. Little by little his life seemed ebbing out of him. Yet one final, huge effort he felt must be made, or he must own himself baffled, defeated.

“Listen, Delphine! I will tell you, so far as I can, what I am going to do, and you shall judge for yourself whether you will go or stay,” he said, throwing as much steel into his voice as possible. “First, I am going to have Bertie’s parentage and

rights here fully recognised. I shall place his mother's marriage-certificate and the other papers you sent me, in the hands of a London lawyer, who will thoroughly go through with the matter. More than that, I intend to throw no veil over the part I have played in keeping him out of his inheritance. Before night falls to-day every man, woman, and child in the county will know I have been a cheat and a villain. Now, can you stand that?"

"My Wolf!" and Delphine in her amazement raised herself from her recumbent position, and sat upright on the couch.

"Do not attempt to argue the matter with me," he said, his voice increasing in strength as he went on. "My mind is made up. No one could move it—not even Judith!"

He said the last words with a slow precision. He intended them to cut her to the heart. It seemed to him only by a direct blow he could loosen her arms from about his neck.

Delphine looked up at him, cold, white, glittering.

“Not even if she knelt at your feet and hung round your neck, as I did last night?” she asked in scornful tones.

“She is not likely to do it; but if she did entreat it would be for good, not base ends, and one might save one’s soul by listening to her.”

Delphine laughed—not her usual long, low trill, but a loud clanging, scornful laugh.

“So then you mean to try and save your soul by means of Miss Judith’s help? Go then at once, my friend; ask her to finish her good work and marry you. She’ll jump at you, no doubt;” and again she laughed.

“I would die inch by inch rather than so insult her,” answered Wolf sternly.

“So then what is no insult to me would be an insult to this sweet, pure-minded young lady?” she queried sharply.

Wolf gave her no reply.

For a minute she sat waiting for it.

Then she rose, went to his side, and laid her hand upon his arm.

“Come, my Wolf,” she said, making an attempt to regain her usual gaiety, “be honest with me. Since when have you held so exalted an opinion of this young lady, that you have looked upon an offer of marriage as an insult to her?”

“Since the very first day I set eyes on her. It will last as long as I have breath left in my body.”

Then these two stood for a moment staring at each other with eyes that said as much as their silence. Words failed them. As well be dumb as loud in passion!

Wolf was the first to find a voice.

“Come, Delphine,” he said, moving one step towards the door, “be reasonable; take the only road that is open to you now. Come into the house, have what refreshment you need, and take what things you like away with you. The house will soon be stirring; that means gossip beginning; and the sooner you are home again in Canada, among your own people, the better.”

Delphine looked round her with dreary, dreamy eyes. Another change was passing over her—real or assumed it would have been impossible to say. To his dying day Wolf was unable to divide what was genuine in this woman from what was false.

“Home!” she repeated, letting her eyes wander here and there absently. She made a movement towards the door, looking out on the fair picture of mountain, forest, and garden which it framed. “This, I thought, was to have been my home—here, I thought, I should live in peace with my Wolf! It is passed—it was a dream.” She shaded her eyes with her hands, then resumed in slower, more mournful tones: “I go—I say good-bye to it all! My fair English home that was to have been, Adieu!”

“Would you accept it as a home under its changed conditions?” asked Wolf wearily. In good truth he felt worn to his last extremity now, capable only of making one grand final effort to get this

woman away from the house before the hue and cry began.

“What!” she exclaimed with a touch of her old savage petulance; “with Miss Judith preaching piety on one side, and you posing as a penitent on the other” (she gave out her p’s as though they were so many raps from a wooden hammer). “Thank you, one or other of us would be under the daisies before a week had passed over our heads.” Then she relapsed once more into a mute dreaminess.

“Come, Delphine,” urged Wolf again; “according even to your own showing, there is no other way.” He spoke as a man might who had taken a narcotic and was beginning to feel its effects creeping over him.

“There is one other way,” said Delphine in a low, strange tone.

But at this moment, a sudden look of terror went fleeting over her face. She grew deathly white, even her lips fading into a grey neutral tint, her eyes growing round and staring.

Wolf followed their direction, and saw through the parted boughs of the trees which let in the wild, beautiful glimpse of valley and mountain—a tall, stalwart stranger with slouched hat and muffled throat.

The distance was too great to discern his features, but Wolf thought he recognized the outlines of the stranger who had alighted at Pen Cwellyn Station the day before.

“What frightens you?” he asked Delphine. “He is most likely some passing tourist. See, he is gone! Now come, let me take you back to the house.”

She made no further resistance. Her steps faltered somewhat; she leaned heavily on his arm; she let him take her into the dining-room and put food before her, but she put it away untasted, begging only for a glass of wine. This she drank eagerly, asking for another and another. The wine seemed to put a little life into her; she smiled up in his face again.

“Now pledge me, my Wolf,” she said

gaily, "as I pledge you: 'A happy future to you! A long life and a merry one!' Come, my Wolf, fill your glass!"

But Wolf would as soon have thought of drinking healths at a funeral as at such a repast as this.

"Put down your glass," he said sternly. "Go upstairs and put together what things you mean to take with you—your jewellery, I mean, you may want it—and I'll go and rouse up someone to get a carriage ready for you. You can easily save the first London train if you make haste." And he went out of the room as he spoke to give the necessary orders.

"My Wolf," said Delphine, calling after him in soft, beseeching tones, "you will let me drive my ponies down for the last time? I can tell one of the men at the station to bring them back."

When, about half an hour afterwards, Wolf himself brought the ponies round to the front door (for he would not let the man come out of the stables), Delphine

was standing on the terrace waiting for him, ready equipped for her journey.

Brilliantly beautiful she looked! Her eyes were dancing, glancing, flashing, changing as on the first day he had seen her; her cheeks were, perhaps, just a little more flushed than was their wont; her lips as coral-red, and smiling as when on the day of their betrothal she had lifted them up to his and said: "Seal our vows with one little kiss, oh, my Wolf!" She was as elaborately and daintily dressed as though she were starting for a royal garden-party or wedding *ête*, instead of a journey to London. Her favourite colours of cream and damask-red were blended and divided about her dress and hat with delicate, harmonious effect, her long cream gloves looking more suited to clasp a partner's hand in a valse than to drive a troublesome pair of fiery little ponies down a steep, rocky road.

"Have you all you want—money, everything?" he asked, as he handed her into the carriage.

“Everything but one,” she answered gaily; “that you only can give me. Come, my Wolf, give me one kiss before we part for ever!”

Even as she spoke she stooped over the side of the carriage and impressed upon his lips one long, light kiss.

There seemed to Wolf an odd, indescribable odour about her lips.

In another moment she was gone, fleeting along at what seemed to him, a wild, reckless speed, throwing him one bright, laughing, defiant look, as she passed through the gates of the Grange.

Outside, for a second she reined up her ponies. Wolf sprang forward, thinking something possibly had gone wrong with their harness. But no; it was only to speak to a man who stood there in low-crowned, slouching hat, and who, to Wolf's intense surprise, swung himself into the carriage alongside of her, and on they went at as wild, wind-like speed as before.

Wolf drew a long weary sigh as they disappeared in the grey distance. Then

he went back to the house, up to his own room, and sank down on his bed utterly spent, mentally and physically. One hour at least of sleep he felt he must have, before he could face the work which that day would bring him to do.

As he turned wearily, hiding his face in his pillows, a thrush perched upon his window-sill burst suddenly into a glad, full-throated song.

Somehow it sounded in his tired ears like a *Te Deum Laudamus*.



CHAPTER XVII.

SUNDAY morning. Church-bells sounding over all the land, households by the score gathering themselves together to start for their divers Zions. A family of four assembled in the hall of the old Grange: a blind old lady with a somewhat enquiring, anxious look on her well-featured face, which seemed to say: "Well, I suppose I shall know all in good time; but I shall be uncommonly glad when the good time comes;" a small boy of four or five, fragile, and fair-haired as a gold-winged fairy; a young girl with pale face and dark eyes, that looked weary and wistful; a tall man, deathly white, with rigid muscles and firm-set mouth, which seemed to betoken a task set before him—

a something to be done that needed a clear brain, an iron will.

Not a trace of last night's storm remained, save that, if possible, the whole landscape of mountain and glen shone out a little more golden-green than its wont. There was a look of wind-blown clearness about it which threw into bold relief every distant peak or jutting crag.

There seemed, too, to lurk a latent fragrance in the air, as though the scent, beaten out of the flowers by over-night's storm, was left behind to tell the tale of its power and grandeur.

Party after party of church-goers went toiling along the steep road to Llanrhaiadr, saying one to another how terrific the tempest of last night had been, and what a mercy it was that the poor little orphan boy at the Grange had been found and brought home before it broke over the mountains.

All sorts of odd stories, anent the finding of little Bertie, were by this time afloat in the neighbourhood, each person having a

theory of his own on the matter, which he affirmed with all the doggedness, and not a little of the exaggerative power, of the Welsh peasant. Of the Reece household servants, not a soul save Bryce knew the real truth, and she was far too wary to commit herself on the matter. The child was saved, that was all she cared about; Miss Judith would, she knew, see that he had his rights, now that wicked aunt of his was off the scene. If Mr. Wolf were wise, he would, of course, leave the house as soon as possible; but there, after all, that was his business, not hers.

Many were the hearty greetings little Bertie had as he drove along to church that Sunday morning, in fact he went bare-headed nearly all the way, and almost kissed the tips of his little fingers off returning the salutations of old, young, and middle-aged.

They mustered a somewhat strong party from the Grange. Wolf had said at breakfast that morning that he wished every soul in the house to be present at the

eleven o'clock service, and that he had a particular reason for wishing it. There had consequently been a more vigorous stampede than usual towards the parish church, and a solitary kitchen-maid, and equally lone stable-boy, remained the only representatives of domestic economy at Plasy-y-Coed.

It seemed a long, silent drive to Judith that morning. Mrs. Reece, even, appeared to have lost her ordinary inclination for asking and answering questions. Whether it was the shadow of coming or of past events which had fallen upon her she knew not, but certain it was her usually serene brow was clouded, her usually active lips were at rest.

As for Wolf, not once during the three miles' drive did he open his lips. In silence he handed his mother and Judith into the carriage, then leaned back in his place with frowning, knotted brow, and eyes that looked all absorbed and far away; in silence he handed them out of the carriage and followed them into the

church; then, to Judith's surprise, instead of taking his usual place in the pew, he went at once into the vestry.

Here he found the worthy rector already robed and about to enter his reading-desk. He shook hands warmly with Wolf.

"You will hardly believe it," he said, "but I have only this morning heard of the terrible anxiety you have been suffering at Plas-y-Coed. I was away from home all yesterday. I returned too late last night for rumours to reach me. This morning I was told of the loss and the finding of the child in one breath. Otherwise, you may be sure, I should have ridden over to offer my services. You must tell me all about it after service, for all sorts of queer stories are flying about the place."

Wolf thanked him briefly.

"I have a favour to beg of you," he then went on to say. "You have frequently asked me to occupy your pulpit. I shall be very glad if you will allow me to do so this morning."

The rector gladly consented, thinking

to himself that possibly Wolf was awakening at last to the responsibilities of his position in the neighbourhood, and was anxious, it might be, to take his place among his neighbours, not only as a rich land-owner, but as an active, zealous clergyman.

When Judith saw Wolf seat himself within the altar-rails, her heart died within her. What did it mean—what could it mean? He could not surely—no, she would not let herself think that. It would be too dreadful! He had some definite reason, no doubt, for what he was doing; he had something to say to the congregation he thought worth saying, some good advice to give—nothing more.

He had something to say to the congregation, and he had no sooner mounted the pulpit and given out his text than she knew what it was, word for word, as though she could read it written in his brain. Self-pilloried he meant to stand there and acknowledge his sin to the world! It was brave, like himself; it was

fiercely defiant, like himself; it was, perhaps, the only sort of repentance and atonement a man of his temperament was capable of, a repentance sincere and thorough, no doubt, but withal without so much as one grain of Christian humility in it.

For one moment before he gave out his text Wolf stood silent in the pulpit surveying the congregation. As usual, the small church was well filled. There were Lord and Lady Ruthlyn, with their family, in their places, the lieutenant of the county and his family in theirs, and Madoxes, and Howels, Wynnes, and Williamsses might be numbered by the score.

The man's face was ashen grey as that of a corpse, his muscles seemed stiff and rigid as though life had gone out of them; one knotted vein stood out on his forehead; his eyes gleamed with something more than their usual brightness; the high light in which he stood threw into prominence his blanched hair, his furrowed brow, the lines which care, not age, had marked

about his mouth. Some of those who saw him that morning in their thoughts might have likened him to a Thomas à Beckett thundering forth a Pope's anathema, but not one to a Paul or a John the Divine.

In the pulpit Wolf had ever had a strong, clear voice, an arresting, an assertive voice—the voice not of a controversialist, a reasoner who is willing to allow that a very fair case may be made out for the other side, but rather that of a dogmatist—a judge, a man given to pronouncing final judgments from which there was no appeal. His voice had never in his best days been firmer or clearer than it was now when he opened his Bible, and read out his text from the fifty-first Psalm : “I acknowledge my offences, and my sin is ever before me.”

He read it out once, looking straight in front of him ; he read it a second time, looking to his right hand—a third time, turning to his left.

Then without preamble of any sort he began his sermon, or rather what was

to stand in guise of sermon to the congregation that day.

“The story of a sinner,” it might have been called, for such it was from beginning to end.

“Not to a scriptural sinner, nor yet to an heroic sinner do I wish to direct your attention to-day,” he said in slightly scornful tones, “but to a most commonplace specimen of a commonplace class—the class who for a mess of pottage will sell what little soul they happen to possess, who at the shrine of Mammon are willing to sacrifice honour, honesty, truth, and religion.”

And then he went on to tell them in the third person, as though that of a stranger, the story of his own life from those old early days of poverty and hardship onwards to that day, extenuating naught, exaggerating naught, naught omitting, naught slurring over.

It took a long time to tell. He spoke slowly; he made long pauses between his sentences—pauses during which the

congregation, looking one at the other, wondered of whom he spoke, scarcely daring, even in their thoughts, to fix the suspicion of the course of crime he detailed on the minister of God who stood there in the pulpit addressing them.

He apologised somewhat for the allusion to his early life of poverty.

“You must not think this is in any sort intended as a palliation of this man’s crime later on. I tell you this portion of his history simply because without it I could not give you a perfect picture of the man. If you take it as an extenuation of his later life you will make a mistake. It is not so intended; you must not so take it.”

On Delphine’s share in the evil-doing, her wiles and temptings, he touched but lightly—as lightly as was consistent with the continuity of the narrative. He spoke of a letter containing an evil offer—an offer of concealing the existence of an heir to property which had lately come to this man, and then dwelt at length

and fully on the deliberate manner in which he had closed with it; the deliberate course of concealment and fraud he had pursued even when, later on, the young heir was committed to his care and protection.

And then he hinted at an attempt which had been made to murder this young heir, where and how he did not think it necessary to relate, for it must be fresh in all their minds at that moment, made, as it was, in their very midst, only two days ago.

Here he made a long pause. It might have been that the recollection of those awful hours of suspense nearly overcame him; it might have been, in good truth, that, stupendous as was this man's strength of will and purpose, sheer physical weakness was beginning to sap both.

There came a visible stir and movement among the congregation as he thus paused. The interest in the narration had by this time passed through its preliminary stage of curiosity, and had

become painful—intense. Judith felt as though Æons had passed over her head since she had entered that little church not much more than an hour ago. Her heart thrilled with every word he uttered, her throat felt choking, her brain went round, as he thus dealt himself blow after blow, each one harder than the last. She longed to stand up and cry aloud in the congregation that there was a side to this man's character which he had not shown to them, and of which they knew nothing, and that, strong as he had been for evil, so strong was he for good.

And Mrs. Reece, too, felt herself suddenly grow aged, spiritless, incapable, as she sat there listening to these terrible revelations—sat with face as immobile and marble-white as the one that looked out of the pulpit, and with will as iron as Wolf's own, suppressing every sign of emotion even to a quiver of her eyelid, that might show her heart was being stabbed in a thousand places.

Wolf's concluding sentences may be given word for word.

"You will ask me," he said, looking round on the people with an eye that would not have quailed before the sternest there, and in a voice which, spite of its failing force, had a something of defiance in it—"you will ask me, naturally enough, how does this man's history concern us—what has it to do with us? This is how it has to do with you, this is how it concerns you, each one as individuals of a community. A plague-spot has somehow shown itself among you—it must be cleansed away. A fraud and criminal act has been done in your very midst, it must be searched out and punished. One among you stands up a greater criminal than ever had sentence of penal servitude read over his head—he must be brought before a bar of justice. It rests with you, fathers of families, magistrates, and administrators of justice in the county to do this.

"I do not need to tell you who this

man is nor where he lives. Nathan-like already your hearts have, I know, turned towards me saying, 'Thou art the man!'"

And then he sat down, and everyone felt the discourse had fitly come to an end, and were right thankful that it had. Each one looked into another's face, drawing a long, deep breath. The old rector got up from his chair, and in a shaking voice, and with tears running down his cheeks, concluded the service, for Wolf made no attempt to do so. He remained seated in the pulpit till the benediction had been pronounced; then, as the congregation stirred and prepared to depart, he rose, left the pulpit, paused at the foot of the stairs to deposit his surplice in the verger's hands, went through the very midst of the people straight to his own carriage, where Judith and Mrs. Reece were already seated.

One and another looked after him.

"He is callous and stony-hearted," said one.

"He is broken-spirited and half-dazed," said another.

“Let him alone,” said a third. “God has judged him. See, he has death written on his face.”

In silence, as they had driven to the church, so Wolf and his party drove back along that weary three and a half miles of road. It might have been a funeral-car they sat in, those three, for their white faces, their bowed heads, and weary, strained eyes, to which the blessed balm of tears had not yet been vouchsafed.

At the gates of the Grange, an unaccustomed sight greeted them—a small knot of people gathered together, evidently awaiting their return.

A man came out of the lodge, as they drew up for the gates to be opened, with a strange story to tell.

He was a police-superintendent, and stated that he had come over from Pen Cwellyn, and wished to speak with Mr. Reece.

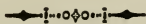
Wolf jumped out of the carriage. What horror was to greet his ears now?

The man looked at the ladies; Wolf took

the hint, and led the way towards the house, the man, in the meantime, telling his story.

A terrible accident had occurred that morning, or rather event, for circumstances attending it showed such evident design and forethought that accident it could scarcely be called. A lady and gentleman had, with carriage and ponies, been precipitated over the Pen Cwellyn falls, a height of some sixty feet or so. Their bodies had been found fearfully mutilated at the base of the jagged rocks, and had been recognised—the lady's as that of a late visitor at the Grange, the man's as that of a stranger who had recently put up at the Pen Cwellyn Inn.

Wolf reeled, sick and faint, against the rough trunk of a big elm-tree near which they stood. This was indeed an awful epilogue to the drama which the past two years had seen played out.



CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS. REECE and Judith saw but little of Wolf that Sunday or the day following. All through that night a light came streaming from his study-window, making a square yellow patch on the lawn beneath, but never a sound came from the room, not so much as the crumpling of paper, or rustling of leaves.

No one dared disturb him in his solitude and sorrow, each one rightly feeling that intrusion at such a time would have been an impertinence. Food was taken to him from time to time, and Mrs. Reece sent one brief message, asking him if he would go to her for a few minutes, to which he wrote back one brief reply :

“Not to-night, mother—to-morrow.”

On the morrow things went on much the same way, save that an intimation from the county coroner was received by Wolf, stating that the inquest on the bodies found below Pen Cwellyn falls would take place that day, and requesting his presence as a witness.

This inquest, of necessity a dismal affair, brought to light so many curious circumstances connected with one of the deceased persons that an adjournment was asked for and granted in order that a *post-mortem* examination might be performed. This examination proved beyond doubt that the lady had been so bent on death that she had taken poison before starting on her last reckless drive, and that the poison must have begun to act just before, or at the time she reached Pen Cwellyn falls.

With respect to this drive, some singular facts transpired. The lodge-keeper at the Grange deposed to hearing the sounds of wheels early on Sunday morning, and wondering who could be about at that time,

peeped out through the blinds, and saw Mr. Reece opening the gates for Miss Pierpoint to drive through. It struck her as being strange and unusual, and she went into the next room, whose window looked down the road, and saw Miss Pierpoint suddenly pull up, and say something to a man waiting there. He immediately jumped into the carriage beside her, and the two drove away down the Pen Cwellyn road.

Wolf's evidence at this point corroborated the woman's testimony.

Another witness—a lad driving some cattle to a field—deposed that at a turn in a narrow lane the carriage and ponies came suddenly upon him. The cattle were straggling, and obstructed the road, and the lady with not a little difficulty pulled up the ponies, who were going at a very rapid pace. The man who sat next the lady offered to take the reins, in fact, urged upon her to give them up to him, whereupon the lady replied :

“My friend, they wouldn't stand your

touch ; you would pull at their mouths as you pulled at your ropes on board ship, and they would go mad—just.”

The evidence of the last witness, however, was of the most importance. He was a night-keeper on Lord Ruthlyn's preserves, and was going home to his breakfast when he heard a carriage coming along at a tremendous pace down the Pen Cwellyn road. He thought at first that the ponies had taken fright and bolted, but when they came nearer he saw that the lady had them well in hand, and was urging them on with light touches of the whip and a coaxing “So ho! so ho?” To his great surprise, she suddenly and sharply turned them round the corner out of the high road and down a narrow, steep way which led straight to the falls. He was himself standing at the corner of this narrow road, and heard the man who sat with her in the carriage make some remark, to which the lady replied: “My friend, it is a short cut;” and as she spoke she once more touched up the ponies with the whip, and they

went like the wind, tearing down the steep lane. The lady looked, he thought, nearly as wild as the ponies, and she laughed a long, low laugh as she spoke which was not pleasant. He was near enough to see that her eyes were very bright and her cheeks very red.

It all struck him as being strange, and he waited at the corner of the turning to see what happened next. The lane was perfectly straight, he could see right down it to where it suddenly overlapped the falls; a narrow footway turning to the left being here the only outlet to the path. On and on went the ponies; he expected to see them slacken, and the lady and gentleman alight to view the falls; instead of that she seemed to be still urging them on, till at last the little creatures were evidently past control, and had bolted. Then he saw the man stand up in the carriage, and snatch at the reins, he saw the horses rear violently on the very edge of the rock, and then in another moment all had disappeared.

He could not bring himself alone to face the terrible sight which he knew must lie at the base of the cliffs, so turned back and went to Pen Cwellyn, and gave notice to the police.

This was all the evidence (with collateral corroboration) needed to prove the identity of the deceased persons, and the cause of their deaths. A suicide and a murder most undoubtedly it was.

Delphine's room and boxes left behind at the Grange were in due course searched, and the scent-case containing three bottles was produced. One of these held chloral, a second a deadly poison, a third a poison not less sure, but slower in its effects. Of this last, no doubt, Delphine, to doubly ensure her own death, had partaken before she set off on her mad quest of vengeance.

Both bodies were buried in Llanrhaiadr churchyard in separate graves. The man's marked only by a grassy mound, Delphine's with a headstone carved with her initials, D. P.; this erected by Wolf's orders. He could not forget that he and this woman

had once clasped hands as betrothed lovers.

When the news of this terrible event reached Canada sundry details respecting Delphine and Olivette Pierpoint were brought to light, and published in the public journals there. It may be as well to give them in this place.

Of the early parentage of these women little was known, save that their father was given to frequenting low cafés in the slums of Montreal. Their mother was supposed to be French, for both children spoke their English with a strong French flavour, a flavour which in later years Olivette dropped, but Delphine cultivated and retained. Both these children were of remarkable beauty and great intelligence, and thus attracted the attention of the manager of a low-class theatre, who, among other *aliases*, bore that of Phil, or Philip Munday. This man conceived the idea of forming a trio of beautiful children, who should make part of a travelling company, and pose in the

interludes as Graces, Fates, or what you will.

One child, a little orphan called Bertha, he had already secured, Delphine and Olivette eventually fell into his clutches, he, no doubt, making it greatly to the father's advantage to hand the children over to him. It did not appear at any time that he treated these children with any special or intentional brutality; they were naturally dragged to his level, which, to say truth, was a low one. As the "Three Graces," afterwards as "The Fates," and last of all as "The Sirens," these girls made the tour of Canada and the States, gaining some little celebrity, and putting not a little money into Monday's pocket. As time went on, however, and the girls grew to womanhood, he began to find them somewhat assertive and unmanageable. They would, strange to say, choose lovers for themselves, also they occasionally accepted engagements without deference to his opinion, and Bertha, the eldest of the three, at last entirely threw

over his authority by eloping with Bernard Reece in his yacht, and persuading Delphine to accompany her. The man Munday felt this blow doubly, first in his pocket, for forthwith his travelling company, bereft of these brilliant actresses, collapsed, and secondly in his affections, for of late he had posed as the accepted lover of Delphine. From this time forth he led a downward career, figuring in all sorts of doubtful vocations with a more than doubtful success. As for Delphine, her introduction to the refinements of life on board Bernard's yacht quickly cured her of all taste for Munday's society, and awoke in her a vast ambition to secure for herself some of the good things which were showered with a lavish hand on Bertha. Bernard's early death so quickly followed by Bertha's, their child, being left unprotected and unacknowledged on her hands, gave her the means in some sort of realising her wild schemes.

She came to Europe. Her tale has been told.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE inquest and funeral in all occupied five days of that eventful week. A wearying, harassing five days they were to all concerned—a five days that seemed to have compressed into them the anxiety, the anguish, the suspense of at least five years. For suspense prolonged, never for one instant lifted, was the one terrible feature of those terrible five days, at least to Judith and Mrs. Reece; what Wolf thought or felt was not easy to get at.

Day after day these two women rose from their beds with one thought in their minds: “What will happen before we lie down here again to-night?”

How far Wolf had made himself amen-

able to the laws of the land they did not know, nor how far the county magnates might feel inclined to put those laws in force against him. But they never saw messenger coming up the avenue, nor heard the sound of stranger's voice in the hall, without saying to themselves: "It has come now. It is Wolf they are seeking."

Judith began to feel herself growing old in those days; Mrs. Reece laid aside her knitting and took to reading her Bible a great deal. It was one with raised characters, specially procured for her by Wolf.

The county magnates, however, showed no sign of moving in the matter, though no doubt they talked it well over between themselves and said each to the other that it was a crying shame that such a crime as that should go unpunished; the man was a self-confessed criminal, someone ought to interfere for the protection of the child; the bishop ought, at least, to be written to, to inhibit the man; and

then, no doubt, they shrugged their shoulders and went home to their dinners, each one saying to himself it wasn't exactly his business, and he didn't care to be the first to move in the matter.

Some or other of these Welsh squires met Wolf almost daily while the inquest was going on ; they used to look somewhat askance at him, and no doubt would have shunned him, had it not been something of an impossibility to shun a man who makes no advances to you, who persistently in a room sits as far off from every one as possible, and never opens his lips save when he is pointedly addressed.

What the man himself, during those days, thought, felt, suffered, no one ever knew, for he took no one into his confidence. He rode over to Pen Cwellyn daily to attend the inquest, answering every question put to him in a dry, hard voice, which seemed to those who heard him to betoken either a callous heart or a torpid brain. On one point only did he observe a strict reticence, positively

declining to satisfy any one's curiosity. This was with reference to Delphine's attempted murder of Bertie, when incidentally alluded to in the course of the inquest. How it came to his knowledge, who was his informant, he declined to state. No good end could be now served by his supplying information on the matter. The child was safe, the intended murderess had met her doom. So far as he was concerned, the whole thing was a sealed book, and though whispers and rumours were rife in many a household throughout the county, no one gave affirmation or denial to them, and a sealed book it remained.

When Wolf came back from Pen Cwellyn each day late in the afternoon, he used to go straight to his study, and there remain till nightfall, and the rest of the household had gone to their rooms. Judith or Mrs. Reece rarely set eyes on him; no one knew when he rose in the morning, nor when he went to bed at night. His study-door was

always shut, and he denied himself to all enquirers. It is true he accorded to his mother the interview she had begged, but it might as well have been refused, for all the gratification she got out of it.

As she said pathetically to Judith afterwards :

“My dear, we were like strangers to each other; we were simply miles apart. He was politeness itself to me, gentle—for him, that is—but I would far sooner have had an ounce or two of his roughness and bad temper, and felt all the time he was my own son. He put all my questions on one side, begged me not to allude to the past, asked me if I wanted anything, said he would send Phœbe to me, and then went away and left me. My own belief is,” and here her quavering voice sank to a whisper, “that his brain is failing him—little by little, my dear, but only too surely.”

And Judith, thinking over all that this man had gone through, and was enduring now, said to herself:

“What wonder was it if his brain did fail him?”

Surely never since the days when Samson Agonistes laded himself with the gates of the city of Gaza, had living man sought to bear alone and unaided so terrible a burthen!

How would it end? The thought oppressed her beyond endurance morning, noon, and night. Sometimes when she watched him riding away to Pen Cwellyn down the avenue in the bright June sunshine, looking white, forlorn, preoccupied, a terror would rise up in her heart lest he should never come back again. The feeling grew upon her day by day. What plans could he be forming in his brain for the years to come? or was he in very truth so brain-sick, so time-tired, that he lacked power to form plans of any sort, and was going to let himself drift hither, thither, like straw or dead leaf upon a whirling stream?

Again and again did his own words, spoken in that hard, metallic voice of

his on that terrible morning when he stood self-pilloried in the little parish church, come back to her, and re-iterate themselves in her brain.

“All that goes to make youth or even middle-life is lacking to this man,” he had said. “Hope is dead, faith, too, in God, in man, in himself. He has no eye for the beauty in the world around him; no ear for the music that holy voices, happy voices are for ever making the universe through. He has no brain to give to thought or study; no heart for human love; no soul for prayer or praise. What more can be wanted to complete a picture of cheerless, joyless old age?”

What more, indeed! And the man not yet in the prime of his manhood! It was too awful to think of him seeing himself thus as it were in a clear, faithful mirror, and going his way saying: “It is Kismet—thus it must be.”

“There is a time to speak, and a time to keep silence.” Judith felt that her time for keeping silence must be drawing

to a close, that her lips could not much longer remain sealed, for there was that in her heart which must be put into words.

When the Friday of that week came she watched him riding away to Llanrhaidr churchyard to attend Delphine's funeral. Others who were there told her afterwards that bare-headed he stood beside the open grave like some marble statue throughout the whole service, but that not once did he bow his head or his lips utter an Amen.

She watched him riding back late in the evening slowly, wearily, like a man whose evening hymn is, "Thank God, my work is over, for there is not left in me strength for another hour of toil." His head was stooped on his breast, the reins lay loosely in one hand, the other occasionally shaded his eyes, or hung limply by his side. He made no effort to guide his horse, he passed the man who stood there waiting for him to dismount, and let the animal take his own way to

the stables. Afterwards she heard him enter the house with his usual slow, flagging step, then almost immediately the study door was shut heavily.

Judith's mind was made up. She went downstairs, ordered wine and food to be brought to her on a tray, and herself took it to Wolf's door, knocking and asking if she might come in.

He knew her voice in an instant, and immediately himself opened the door.

"Why, what is this?" he exclaimed, taking the tray out of her hands and carrying it into the room; "what does it mean, Judith?"

"It means," she replied firmly, "that you must eat and drink, for you have need of food. Sit down, I mean to wait upon you;" and she drew a chair forward for him, and placed the tray in front of him.

He obeyed her like a little child almost, looking about him meantime somewhat absently and dreamily. He put the meat away from him, however, taking only the bread and wine which she offered.

"See Judith," he said, "it is a sacrament to me." And in good truth a sacramental feast it seemed to both in its silence and solemnity.

When he had finished he leaned back in his chair languidly; he looked like a man wearying for sleep and rest, which for some reason he dared not take.

"Why not?" said Judith gently. "Lie down and rest; I am sure you are worn out."

Her voice seemed to recall his drowsy senses. He pulled himself together and rose from his chair, making a visible effort to do so.

"Will you go out with me, Judith, this evening, into the woods, it is not very late? You would not be afraid, would you?" he said.

He made the request humbly, diffidently. Judith mentally compared his manner of asking now with the peremptory "Come into the woods" he was wont at one time to address to her.

She hesitated only a moment.

“Are you fit to go out this evening?” she asked, “after all the fatigue you have been through to-day?”

His reply was another question: “Are you afraid to trust yourself with me, Judith?” It was spoken humbly, diffidently, as before.

It cut Judith to the heart. It seemed to say, “Now that my infamy is blazoned abroad in the world, a young and innocent girl may well hesitate to be seen in my company.”

“Afraid? No! I will fetch my hat at once!” was her indignant rejoinder, and forthwith she departed.

When she came downstairs, Wolf was waiting for her at the hall-door. They went out through the garden, thence into the fields, thence into the woods beyond, almost in silence.

The sun had only just sunk behind the mountains, a shifting, golden haze yet filled the glen, and hung in patches on the mountain-side; but here, in the woods, all was solemn, twilight dimness; green was

fading into grey ; bird's notes were hushing and ending in low, soft trills. There was a distant cooing of some sleepy wood-pigeon, a far-away sound of burring insect or twilting bat. That was all. As they made their way through the tangle of brushwood, stooping under the low-growing bows of sycamore and birch, the place seemed to Judith solemn, sweet, and holy as the aisle of a church.

Wolf walked on a little ahead, stamping down, here and there, a tall thistle, and carefully clearing her path of bramble and briar, yet, so it seemed to her, with such feeble, languid hands, and eyes so inward and, withal, so far away, one could fancy he was looking at strange sights in another world.

Judith felt somehow spellbound, as though her lips had been touched with an enchanter's wand, and power to part them failed her. On and on in silence she followed him ; where he led she felt she must go, though it were to the nethermost gulf to the souls of the lost.

At the edge of St. Govan's stream he paused for the first time. Something had whispered to her that he would lead her here; her thoughts flew to the first walk they had taken together now so long ago, and the desperate eager questions he had put to her about the possibility of an erring soul achieving salvation. Was this also in his thoughts, she wondered, and would he—did he mean in this place to repeat his old vehement questions?

His first words, however, showed that another, not himself, filled his thoughts now.

"Judith," he said in quiet dreamy tones, that had not in them the faintest echo of his old abrupt peremptoriness, "my mother is old and feeble now; I want you to promise me that, in the days to come, you will think of her, and take care of her."

Judith felt greatly troubled, she scarce knew why.

"To the end of my life," she answered with odd catchings of her breath, "she shall be as my own mother."

"Thank you," was all he said in reply. Then on he went once more, turning sharply to his left hand and following now the upward course of the stream.

On she went after him; the sparkling rivulet narrowed and rippled, and widened again, and then dashed itself in a miniature cascade over mossy stones. Quieter and darker grew the woods around them, greyer and dimmer showed the patches of sky here, there, through the arching boughs overhead.

They had now almost reached the foot of the mountains; the steep treacherous path which Delphine had cajoled the little Bertie to mount was about a hundred yards or so in front of them. It was a place of dreary memories. Judith thought with a shudder of the terrible hours she had passed there.

Wolf's voice was even quieter and more weary than before, as he asked a second question:

"I know," he said, "you will take care of little Bertie. I need not ask you to do

that; but will you think of Oscar too—sometimes?”

Judith, with an effort, steadied her voice to answer in the lowest of tones:

“Bertie shall be to me as my own child, Oscar, as my own brother.”

And for the life of her she could not divest herself of the feeling that she was talking to a man in a trance, who was seeing sights that were veiled from her eye, hearing sounds that her dulled senses could not receive.

Wolf looked up dreamily, wearily, at the beetling mountains, dun-grey now in the fast-fading light.

“I want to be alone, Judith,” he said, speaking like a tired child whose powers have been overtaxed with a day of toil. “I think if I went up those mountains I might perhaps be able to—to pray.”

He said the last word hesitatingly and almost in a whisper.

Judith started, looking up in his face; it showed ashen and faded as the twilight itself. The words of Christ to His disciples,

"Tarry ye here, while I go and pray yonder," came into her head. It might be easier to pray alone on a mountain-side than in a deep wooded glen.

She seated herself on a rough mossy stone.

"I will wait here till you come back," she said quietly, folding her hands in her lap.

He made no reply. He gave her one long, lingering, dreamy look, and then slowly and wearily began to mount the steep path.

Her eyes followed him, step by step, as he went. Faint and fainter sounded his footfall; dim and dimmer showed his black, stooping figure against the grey sky, until at length he rounded the narrow ledge of the upward way where grew those treacherous trees in which Bertie had so nearly met his doom, and disappeared from her sight.

Patiently and with clasped hands she waited his return.

The air began to blow chill and damp,

a low breeze began to sigh among the larches. The night-clouds began to creep up from the horizon, a ghostlike mist seemed to hang between the sycamores, and spread itself over the running stream.

And suddenly as with electric force another thought flashed into her brain—of Moses, when he had finished his work and said “good-bye” to his countrymen, going up a solitary mountain-side alone in solemn grandeur to die.

She sprang to her feet, a sudden, awful terror seizing her heart.

“Oh, Wolf, Wolf, Wolf!” she cried passionately, stretching out her arms towards the rough, blue crags. “Come back, come back!”

But only the mountains and forest echoed her wild cry through the gathering gloom: “Wolf, Wolf, come back!”

Then, “at one stride came the dark.”

CHAPTER XX.

FOUR new years in succession have been born, have flourished, have died, and been buried by their successors under heaps of snow since Wolf and Judith looked their last at each other at the foot of the Llanniswth mountains, and lo! now a fifth with laggard ancient feet is going to his death-bed, but never a word of Wolf Reece yet!

It is now a thing of the past how Judith and Mrs. Reece had sought him the country through; how they had offered rewards for any scrap of tidings of him if living, of his body if dead; how, from time to time, their hearts had been rent and torn by scares and rumours; how they had been now and again lifted

to the pinnacle of false hopes only to be once more dashed to the depths of despair; how Judith had herself scoured the mountains from north to south, how she and Mrs. Reece had together posted from town to town, from village to village, all through North Wales, seeking news of him; how they had joined hands in prayer, praying God to let them know the worst, and end their awful suspense; how they had wept on each other's necks as, this prayer denied them, they had risen up and faced the dreary days once more; how, at length, with bowed head and wan face they had gone about the house trying to stamp out of their hearts alike hope, expectation, or despair.

All this is now a thing of the past; whatever else of good or bad the hours may have in store for them, this, with its intermittent hopes and numbness of despair can never be given them to live through again.

During these five years so nearly run

out, time, the great scene-shifter, has done his work nimbly, deftly, as of yore. And death, that silent footed stage-manager, has followed in his wake, changing the dramas, and calling now this actor, now that, from off the stage; dismissing here one who played a chief part, there, one who was little more than a *figurante*; here one who was a very veteran in his art, there one who was scarcely even a *débutante*.

Over to France he went, found out old Uncle Pierre in retreat at Versailles, and cried to him to give up his part for the time, for exit had come. Then back to Plas-y-Coed he footed it, and wrested the play-book from little Bertie's hands before he had well conned his first half-dozen lines. Off to India next, and there he finds Colonel Wynne with all sorts of delightful pre-visions in his heart of a bright, happy, English home, ruled by a bright, happy, English daughter. He touches his hand, he whispers a word in his ear, and lo! the colonel,

instead of steaming home along the pleasant ocean highway, with a score or so of other cheery, homeward-bound passengers, sees a great silent ship waiting for him, in which, willy-nilly, he is forced to take passage, and go sailing away to the unknown land.

It was hard on Judith, thus one by one to have her household gods shattered. Her heart seemed to grow very chill, very empty. She was not one of those who fill old shrines with new divinities. No; "let that which God hath made empty so remain ; let that which is broken lie broken still," was rather the language of her heart.

Little Bertie's death she probably felt the most of the three. It was more actual to her—it left more gaps and blanks in her everyday life. Uncle Pierre she had wept and bewailed as henceforth dead to her when he went sailing away to China, and she had, to a certain extent, over-lived (though unknowingly to herself) the wrench and pain of that

bereavement before the final blow came. For her father's death her grief was even less poignant; years of separation had made a gulf between them which it would have taken years of companionship to bridge over. But with little Bertie it was otherwise. The child had somehow so entwined himself about her heart, she scarce knew which were his fibres, which her own.

After Wolf's disappearance she had constituted herself his guardian, his teacher, his nurse, his playfellow—in a word, his mother. The words on Judith's lips, "He shall be as my own child," meant more than they might on the lips of most young girls. As her own child he was to her during the brief span of life allotted to him, and when, after a winter of sharp lung-disease, he slowly faded, just as spring violets and primroses were coming into bloom, it was as her own child she mourned him.

Old Mr. Maurice, so long administrator to the estate of the Reece family, had

been charged with the task of identifying the little Bertie as rightful heir to the property. He naturally preferred a coadjutor in the matter, and selected for the post a much-esteemed lawyer living at Pen Cwellyn. Together they went through Wolf's papers, finding them in a surprising state of order and exactness. In a large sealed envelope in a prominent place they found the marriage certificate of Bertie's father and mother, together with full information of the minister who performed the ceremony, and where he could most likely be heard of. All receipts and expenditures of the estate were made up to date with scrupulous exactness, and Wolf's bank-book showed pitifully with what small sums for personal use he had contented himself, and how insatiable had been Delphine's rapacity.

The details of the inheritance had not under these conditions been difficult to arrange. The Pen Cwellyn lawyer had proposed that Bertie should be made a

ward in chancery with Judith nominated as guardian.

This had been scarcely done when symptoms of his mother's fatal disease showed themselves in the child, and he was removed from earthly to heavenly keeping.

Oscar, of course, in the event of Wolf's decease, stood next heir; in his brother's death, however, Oscar steadily refused to believe, and as steadily (for three years, at any rate) refused to take possession of the estate. The story of Wolf's sin, of his repentance, and of his subsequent disappearance had been a terrible blow to Oscar; it had been told him gently but truthfully by Judith in a long, carefully-worded letter. She and Mrs. Reece had rightly judged that it would be wiser and kinder not to keep the truth from him, for there is no land to which rumour, on its swift, strong wing, cannot bear its load of lies.

A sharp, bitter blow it was to the lad that the brother he had so deeply rever-

enced could thus have erred, but it was a blow nevertheless which seemed in some sort to restore his own mind to its right balance.

It somehow shook out of his heart the ashes of the lost love, the regrets, the self-pity which lay smouldering in it ; it seemed to set his feet more firmly in the upward path he had marked out for himself.

Oscar did very well out in India. He made friends rapidly in all directions. Of his own free will he would have remained there, climbing step by step up the ladder, making his own way and fortune in life. His mother's importunities, however, and, of late, Judith's, succeeded at length in bringing him home.

"See, dear Oscar," wrote Judith, "everyone, everything here, needs you. Your mother cannot hope to see many more years. She has had pain and sorrow enough, Heaven knows. Give her what you can of peace, if not of joy, in her later years. Then, too, this place is needing a master sadly. Mr. Maurice is so

old he wants to resign, and there is no one here who can appoint his successor. Everything seems getting into almost inextricable confusion for want of a final decision. A variety of small, harassing matters are being daily referred to your mother, with which she really ought not to be troubled. It certainly seems to me your bounden duty to return at once, and take all these things upon your own shoulders. Do not look upon yourself as in any sort an usurper of Wolf's rights or inheritance. Call yourself his steward, if you will, and hold yourself in readiness to give up the reins at any moment. But, in any case, come, for we all of us feel that you ought to be here."

And then there followed a postscript—much such an one as she had sent him a score or so of times before—how that Theo Martin had been staying once more at the Grange, and how sweet, and gentle, and beautiful she had grown.

And after this a second postscript, the like of which she had never sent him

before, and which, strange to say, did not touch him in the manner he had at one time expected such news might. It contained the tidings that Lord Havers was dead, and Leila, consequently, a widow—how that her husband had concluded a most profligate course of living by a death through delirium-tremens, and how that Leila had gone home to her father's house, a mere wreck of the beautiful girl of lang syne.



CHAPTER XXI.

THUS things in due course adjusted themselves, and when the fifth year after Wolf's disappearance was preparing to make its exit amid Christmas joys and festivities, Oscar was well-established as master of Plas-y-Coed, and, more than that, was making preparations for the due instalment of a sweet young girl as its mistress.

That young girl was Theo Martin. Judith had taken care that Oscar should find her at the Grange on his return from India, and somehow, though how it came about, no one seemed quite to know, when she went home, after a long visit, it was understood to be only on furlough, to order her trousseau and be married from her father's house.

So Christmastide brought to the old Grange that year not only a train of kindly charities for the poor and needy, but also preparations for a banquet to be given in honour of the return of bride and bridegroom, on as large a scale as anything ever attempted at Plas-y-Coed. Every neighbour, high or low, rich or poor, was to be invited. In the servants'-hall covers were to be laid for upwards of a hundred persons; in the dining-hall above space was to be extended to its utmost limit, so that not one of the tribe of Howell, Madox, or Watkins should be excluded.

Judith herself took the keenest and most active interest in these preparations for the feast. Heavy as had been sorrows through which this young woman had passed, they had not hardened her heart, nor turned her spirit to gall. Possibly she was not of the kind to be hardened or embittered by trouble. The true diamond can stand the touch of the lapidary's chisel, and get increased worth

and beauty from the friction it undergoes. There could be but little doubt now of what stuff Judith was made.

As of old, every one, more or less, seemed to depend on her for something. Bryce, still holding the keys of the household in her wiry old fingers, deferred to her in every matter, small and great, from the supply of household damask which the young couple would be supposed to need, to the decoration of the banqueting-hall and table.

Mrs. Reece whispered to her confidentially:

“I don’t want to wear your brains out quite, my dear, but I shall be greatly obliged to you if you will take as much as you can off mine.”

Oscar, even, took to consulting her as to where the tennis-court should be made, upon various details of stable-management and expenditure, and the “latest sweet thing” in fishing-rods and guns. And as for Theo, the folios of letter-paper Judith received from her while the trousseau was in progress, requesting

her opinion on colour, size, and shape of all sorts of garments, definite and indefinite, would have necessitated an extra leathern pouch for the solitary postman of the district had not the one he carried been already of inordinate size.

With hands thus filled, it may be imagined Judith had but little leisure for repining over a sorrowful past, or for tending and watering "that sweet self-pity," which is so emphatically the plant of idle and luxurious hours.

Not that the past ever was or could be dead to her. Not one act of the bitter drama in which they had all played their parts ever was or could be obliterated from her memory. Every word Wolf had ever spoken to her, every look his eyes had ever given her, remained as deeply impressed upon her memory as though graven there with iron tool. Her grief had in no sense of the word gone from black to grey, from grey to colourless white. No; black it was and ever would be to the end of

her life—black, dense, irremediable as the darkness that filled any dungeon or churchyard vault. But she thanked Heaven she had door to shut upon it and padlock to put upon the door, and no one to the end of her days need be any the worse for the sad recollections which lay hidden thus under lock and key.

Sometimes it is true—though this always when alone—one by one the spectres of the past would troop forth and confront her with their gaunt faces and lack-lustre eyes, and, for a time earth would seem to her a dreary, beclouded place, and heaven—ah, such a long way off! Sometimes at night, in her own room, the distant mountains, looming out of the blackness, would seem to her dismal giant-ghosts guarding their terrible secret; the very stars would seem to shine with a pitiless glitter for the story they might, but would not, tell; but that did not mean that next day she would go weeping and moaning about the house, or, sour-tem-

pered, shut herself in her own room. No ; it meant, possibly, a night spent on her knees, with hidden eyes, a lying, face downwards, on her pillow, with so sharp a sense of pain at her heart as to be real and physical, cheeks a little paler the next day, and eyes a little more weary, and, if possible, a little more of kindness and attention than usual to be shown to Mrs. Reece—nothing more.

Mrs. Reece also was brave in bearing this sorrow as she had been in bearing her other and earlier troubles ; possibly, she thought to herself, it was all for so short a time now that nothing could matter very much. Naturally, however, she had suffered physically more than Judith. At her age, long hours of passionate grief leave a more tangible impress than they do on persons some forty years younger ; the rheumatism, which before had been intermittent, was now chronic, the labour of mounting stairs could scarcely be undertaken, and, once seated in her chair, no matter where, she was loth to move out of it.

“Put me face towards the mountains,” she would say pathetically to the servant, who placed her chair ; and face towards the mountains she would sit for hours, her blind eyes, possibly, filled with visions of her eldest son coming back to her the way he had gone.

Oscar’s return home with his young bride naturally put a little more of life and circulation into the house. Theo tried to hush her cheery laugh, feeling almost guilty in her new-found happiness, and Oscar made as little parade as possible over his possession of a sweet young wife and mastership of Plas-y-Coed ; but for all that there was more stir, more talk, more movement about the old place than there had been for many a day past.

On this particular Christmas Eve, as may be imagined, the stir and movement was increased a thousandfold. The coming and going was incessant, the sound of wheels up and down the avenue as though never coming to an end.

The banquet was to take the form of dinner for the poorer, luncheon for the

richer, neighbours ; all were to sit down at the same time—one o'clock ; an early hour having been chosen out of consideration for those who had long distances to drive along steep roads, rendered yet more difficult by late heavy falls of snow.

It was a severe winter that year, hard frosts had set in at the beginning of December, and the whole country round was ice-bound. The woods looked like fairyland itself, with every fir-spire, every pine-needle marked out in glittering crystal. The mountains, snow-capped, showed grandly desolate against a leaden, storm-threatening sky.

“There'll be a storm before night ; we must get away early,” said one to another of the expected guests, as they prepared to set out for Plas-y-Coed.

“You'll see that all the fires are well kept up, Davies,” said Judith to the butler, for the last time making the rounds of the rooms before she went into the drawing-room to help Theo and Mrs. Reece receive their guests.

Bryce followed her step by step as she went.

"They have forgotten something, Miss Judith, they ought to have remembered," she said, looking discontentedly up and down the long, tastefully-arranged dining-table.

Judith's eye followed hers.

"The table seems to me perfect, Bryce, I can't find fault; you must tell me what they have forgotten," she answered.

"The chair for the missing guest, Miss Judith, that's all," answered Bryce with the air of one who thought the *ultima thule* of human forgetfulness had been reached.

Judith started. There was one guest always missing, so it seemed to her, at every meal to which they sat down.

"Yes," she said sadly, "the chair must be placed. There's one we shall all miss to-day."

Bryce did not respond to this. In her secret heart she had never quite forgiven Wolf for the part he had played. She began bustling about among the chairs.

"Where shall I place the empty chair, Miss Judith; either side it will make the numbers uneven?" she asked.

Oscar coming in at this moment had to have the situation explained to him. He grew suddenly grave.

“The lists have been gone through carefully,” he said; “no one has been forgotten; there can be only one person really missing to-day, and there can be only one place for him—that of the master of the house.”

So the place at the foot of the table was laid and left vacant in memory of one who was Heaven only knew where!

The guests wondered as they came streaming into the dining-hall, Oscar leading the way, with Lady Ruthlyn on his arm, and cast their eyes on this empty chair. Then one began to tell another the tradition of the house, how that no Reece ever made a Christmas feast without leaving a vacant place for a possibly omitted guest, and the dreary story of the old squire whose coffin had been seen to pass through the closed turnpike-gate was told once more.

Mrs. Reece took her usual place at the head of the table, Judith hers at her right

hand ; Oscar and his bride sat facing each other half-way down.

It was a bright, pleasant scene to look upon. The old hall itself, with its fine carvings, stained glass, and ancestral portraits, was worthy of any painter's pencil ; the table, with its load of shining glass and silver, its tastefully-arranged hot house fruit and flowers, looked as inviting as table could to hungry guests who had driven some six or eight miles in keen, frosty air. Handsome, well-featured faces were in the ascendant among the younger guests ; good dressing prevailed among the elder, and one and all had that kindly, genial feeling towards each other which alone can make an entertainment of this sort a success.

All these good people were well-pleased to be able to hold out the right hand of fellowship to a neighbour who promised, as Oscar did, to be one of the right sort ; all were glad to be able to bury in oblivion the miserable story of

his elder brother's life. To have heard their hearty expressions of good-will, their cheery predictions of good-fortune to the young bride and bridegroom, one might have thought that never a cloud had darkened the windows of Plas-y-Coed, never a tragedy had been enacted within a stone's-throw of its gates.

So the wine flowed, jest and merry talk went round; Lord Ruthlyn paid the bride the neatest and prettiest of compliments, which she received with arch incredulity and the softest of blushes and smiles; the lieutenant of the county talked politics with Mrs. Reece, and recalled memories of various members of the Reece family he had known lang syne. A Madox, seated on one side of Judith, talked foxes and hounds to her, while a Howell, who sat opposite, wondered over her beautiful eyes and pale face, and thought how sweet a bride she would make when her time came. And Judith looked straight in front of her through the windows at the snow-crowned

mountains, and thought of one who had once made his way up their rough grey sides, and had never come down.

The storm which had threatened all day came creeping on near and nearer. An east wind began to sigh and moan among the beeches; a few slow, sleepy flakes of snow began to fall.

It grew very dark within the house. Oscar gave orders to one of the servants to light the candles, which, in case of need, had been placed on the table. But Bryce stopped the man with a lighted taper in his hand.

"Candles lighted at a wedding feast," she said in a portentous whisper, "means a funeral before the year is out."

"Oh, the old raven!" cried Lady Ruthlyn; "better let us feel for our food, and the way to our mouths, than have such ill-luck as that whispered about."

So the candles were let alone, the room grew dark and darker, the snow-clouds came creeping down apace, and people began uncomfortably to think of the

close of the entertainment, and the long, chilly drive that was in store for them.

It might have been this thought, it might have been the darkness which made something of a pause in the midst of the bright talk and laughter.

"I remember," said Lord Ruthlyn, addressing Judith across the table, "much such a Christmas Eve as this, now some forty years ago. Ah, you won't be able to boast of such a stretch of memory as that for many a long year to come."

Judith made no reply, and Lord Ruthlyn, looking up at her, saw a sudden startled expression sweep over her face; her eyes seemed to grow round with terror, her cheeks blanched, her lips, even, became ashen. His eyes naturally followed the direction of hers, and to his intense surprise he saw that the vacant seat at the foot of the table was vacant no longer.

In the semi-darkness, amid the laughter and the talk, one had silently entered the room, and taken possession of it.

CHAPTER XXII.

JUDITH'S heart beat wildly. Did her eyes deceive her? Did others see what she saw, or was this but some spectre rising, Banquo-like, to take his place among them for a brief moment before settling to everlasting rest?

At that, the lower end of the hall the shadows were deepest, and an occasional fitful gleam of firelight seemed only to define the semi-gloom. She could make out—yes, there could be no doubt about it—the outline of a massive head, of broad but stooping shoulders. Great Heavens! Did no one see him beside herself? Why was everyone turning round to stare at her, not him?

Was she going mad, and was madness

written in her face, that they gazed and gazed at her in this way?

She could bear it no longer. She sprang to her feet, clasping her hands together.

“It is Wolf, Wolf, Wolf!” she cried, with a loud, passionate cry.

And then the guests, one and all, rose tumultuously to their feet.

Mrs. Reece alone sat still, trembling exceedingly.

“What! Who?” she said in a low, quavering voice. “Judith, for the love of Heaven, do not keep me long in suspense!”

But no one was in suspense long, for Oscar, with one loud shout, had jumped up from his chair, had thrown his arms round the stranger’s neck, and with one hearty “Thank God, at last!” had burst into a flood of tears. The thoughts of bride, of assembled guests, of mastership over a famous property, all swamped in one deep flood of joy that Wolf, his Wolf—brother, father, guardian to him from

his earliest years, was back among them all once more.

“Take me to my son, Judith—where is he?” said Mrs. Reece, making a vain effort to rise from her chair.

There was no need; for Wolf, loosing Oscar’s arms from about his neck, rose and went to her side, one and other of the guests falling back and making way for him.

A fuller light fell upon him as he walked the length of that long room. It was Wolf Reece, not a doubt, with his stalwart figure, massive head, and stooping shoulders, yet not altogether the Wolf Reece of five years ago—certainly not the Wolf Reece with whom Judith had parted so sadly at the foot of the Llan-niswth Mountains. A change of some sort had passed over the man; there was a something written in his face now which that other man lacked, there was a something lacking in his face which that other man had. True, there was a past, and a sorrowful past, written in every

line of feature and brow. It was emphatically a face with a story to tell, no one could mistake it ; but the fierce forlornness had died out of his eyes, the hopelessness, the look of desperate struggling, seemed gone ; in its stead there seemed to have come a quiet, a restfulness which told of victory gained, an end achieved.

Judith's hands were both outstretched towards him as he kissed and folded his mother in his arms. He took them both, he held them for one moment in his own ; their eyes met—nothing more.

There followed a huge amount of handshaking all round. For, somehow, these kindly members of the Welsh squirearchy seemed suddenly to have made up their minds, since the evil-doing of this man could not be undone, it had best be forgotten, or, at any rate, forgiven, as heartily as it had been heartily repented of. Then one and the other began to say, "It was time they said their good-byes, the storm would soon be down upon them ; a family-meeting of this sort was not of daily occur-

rence ; how glad they would all be to be alone ! ” and so forth.

Wolf bowed and thanked them. His manner of somewhat reserved courtesy seemed to have returned to him, the icy-cold abruptness, which for a time had distinguished him, had departed.

“ There is one thing I would like to make clear to you, gentlemen, before you go,” he said in clear, firm tones, “ and that is, that I intend to resign all right and title to this place in favour of my brother Oscar.”

Oscar began a loud demur. Judith laid her hand upon his lips “ Hush, not now ! ” she whispered.

And so, with brief adieux, the guests departed, like the gentlemen and ladies that they were, asking no questions, though wondering much among themselves over the strange story Wolf must have to tell.

When the footsteps of the last departing guest had died away, Mrs. Reece laid her tremulous old hand on her elder son’s arm. “ Tell me,” she said, “ have you

been far away from us all this weary five years ? ”

“ I have been at times in the far North of England, at times in the extreme south, and at times within ten miles of my own door,” answered Wolf slowly.

“ Within ten miles of your own door ! ” repeated Mrs. Reece.

“ Oh, Wolf ! ” cried Oscar indignantly, reproachfully. “ And our hearts were breaking for you all that time. Did you never think of that ? ”

“ I thought of it, Oscar ; it added not a little to my punishment,” answered Wolf sadly. “ I had broken your hearts before I left you, I knew that ; and worse still, had brought shame and dishonour upon you. It seemed to me I could not heal your hearts by staying here with you all, but I could do something to lift the disgrace from the house by hiding it and myself in some unknown corner. But leave me to tell my story my own way, Oscar. You can judge me when it is ended.”

So they left him to tell his story his

own way, gathering about him in a circle, with eyes fixed intently upon his face (the face they had never expected to gaze upon again in this life, at any rate) with breath held in at times, but never a word escaping their lips.

The story took a long time to tell. It began with that dreary twilight good-bye he had said to Judith at the foot of the Llanniswth mountains, and told how worn-out in mind and body, dazed and incapable, his one thought had been to creep up there, and in solitude to say a prayer and die. How it seemed to him that death could be the only fit ending to his miserable career; how that he felt it must be in very truth at hand when, as he reach the mountain-top, cloud-capped and night-crowned then, he sank down in a heavy stupor or fainting-fit.

Or it might have been a trance. He did not know. He could not say. Nor could he say how long it lasted. He only knew that in the grey dawn of morning a vision came to him. He seemed to be in a garden,

shut in with high walls, a carefully-tended, neatly-kept place, filled with luxuriant flowers. He had gardening tools in his hand, but for some reason or other had ceased from his work, and stood looking around him at the beautiful plants.

Suddenly a cool shadow fell on him, and looking up, he saw it was the shadow of an angel with outstretched wings. At the same moment a voice, sweet and solemn as a distant bell, spoke, saying :

“Go, take your tools, and work outside the garden-wall. There are plenty of labourers who will work within.”

He awoke, feeling a message had come to him straight from Heaven, and that his life, which in his despair he had accounted forfeited, had been given back to him. His clothes were drenched with the night-dews; his limbs were stiff and all but incapable; but nevertheless he managed to drag himself to his feet, intent only upon obeying what seemed to him a Divine mandate—upon finding out where

was "outside the garden-wall," and setting to work there as a labourer.

In very truth this seemed to the man his one only chance of reparation and atonement.

Slowly he dragged his weak, weary limbs adown the mountain, wrapped still in its dawn, mists and dews, and at its very base the question he held in his heart seemed answered. A troop of gipsies, in long, slow, lumbering vans, were going along the steep road, and one of them, walking at the head of the foremost horse, pitying, possibly, his wan, weary looks, pulled up, and offered to give him a lift.

Wolf somehow managed to stumble into the van, and then fell senseless on its floor, overcome utterly now in mind and body.

For weeks he lay in the grasp of fever, unconscious of all that went on about him, but tended by these half-wild, altogether heathenish people, with a rugged kindness and care all their own.

Truth compels the admission, however,

that while he lay thus ill and unconscious, they robbed him of every penny he possessed; that was simply their way of earning their livelihood. Also, it may be surmised, that the main motive for their kindly care of him and the indefatigable manner in which they shielded him from prying eyes, lay in the fact that by so doing they thought they were eluding the vigilance of the police.

“Why didn’t you set me down by the wayside to die?” Wolf asked their chief one day, when he had so far recovered as to be able to take his turn at the horse’s head.

The man shook his head.

“It isn’t our way with those we’ve given shelter to,” he answered. “Besides, we guessed by your mutterings and talk in your fever that you were being hunted down by the police (you said a great deal about your hands being stained with blood, and the like); and ’t isn’t our fashion to help them in their work—they don’t help us in ours.”

So for five years Wolf had sojourned with this wandering tribe, an Ishmael among Ishmaelites, learning their trades of basket-making and tinkering, teaching them to read and write, marrying their sons and daughters together, christening their children, preaching to the elders; not as in the old days he had preached to his sinners in his London church; from an immeasurably superior height condescending to their depth, but as one standing on their level, a man who had fallen low as the lowest there, a sinner to sinners.

Wolf Reece's five years among the gipsies may one day be written and given to the world; it may contain a few hints useful to those desirous to work, as he did, "outside the garden-wall."

The best testimony to the success of his work among them lay in the fact that, little by little, the tribe melted into less than half its original numbers, many of the younger men and women betaking themselves to honest trades, and settling down in decent neighbourhoods.

At length the old chief died, leaving neither kith nor kin to step into his shoes. An odd circumstance followed. Wolf with one voice was unanimously elected king in his stead. Possibly he was the first, and may be the last clergyman of the Church of England ever elected a gipsy king.

He accepted the honour conferred upon him, but announced his intention of ruling as an autocrat. His first decree was a strict prohibition of thieving in every shape or form; his second an order that every man should adopt an honest trade. The result was that the remaining half tribe was split into fractions, and eventually altogether dissolved.

What was he to do now that his work had virtually ended itself? Chance answered the question. Chance had brought him in his journeyings to the borders of North Wales; chance placed in his hands the fragment of a newspaper containing the announcement of Oscar's wedding, and his intended return

to Plas-y-Coed to receive the congratulations of the county.

But Wolf's voice, clear and steady as it had been throughout his narrative, here suddenly grew husky and threatened to fail him. He threw a troubled look at Judith.

"I thought," he went on, "that two who were very dear to me had joined hands now. I said to myself, 'They are worthy of each other; who am I to grudge them their happiness?' and I prayed harder than ever I had prayed before that my name might become a dead letter to you all. But somehow the prayer seemed useless and vain. I could fancy it was being thrown back in my teeth as I uttered it. My heart yearned and ached for you all. My soul had grown so strong within me now, it would make itself felt, it would carry all before it. Perforce it drove me back to my old home. I said to myself, 'I will creep like a thief into the house, I will read in their faces whether my prayer

has been heard, and they have forgotten me.' ”

But Judith could keep silence no longer. The room was quite dark now, for the big fire had burned low, and the lamps were not yet lighted. No one could see her face as she rose hurriedly from her chair.

“Ah, cruel, cruel,” she cried in low, passionate tones, “to think you could keep your own truth while others lost theirs!”

The words seemed forced from her lips. She turned abruptly, and quitted the room.

Oscar looked up keenly into Wolf's troubled face.

“Is it your pride or your humility which will keep you and Judith apart?” he asked bluntly. “For the life of me I couldn't say which.”

It was the first time in his life Oscar had ever turned mentor to his elder brother.

Wolf, with never a word, rose from his chair and left the room.

Without, in the big hall, lamps were

lighted, curtains were drawn. Coming out from the dark room, the light was dazzling. Wolf had to shade his eyes with his hand to distinguish Judith at the farther end of the hall, standing at the glass doors which opened on to the terrace.

Outside, the garden lay one pure, unsullied sheet of snow. The storm was over; a clear, full moon went sailing overhead, flooding mountain, wood, and valley with its silver light.

A small, dark figure, standing just outside the doorway, showed wan and ghost-like between the white of the snow at her feet, the white of the moon overhead. Her face was upturned. It had a curious, questioning look on it, born half of patience, half of pain. Truth to tell, she was asking herself much the same question as Oscar had asked of his brother not a minute ago, and had found it every whit as difficult of solution as he.

It was no wonder. In this man Wolf Reece's somewhat complex nature, his pride so frequently masqueraded as humility, his

humility as pride, it may be doubted whether he himself was at times quite sure which was which.

There came a strong, kindly voice at her elbow which made her start and tremble.

“Child, child,” it asked, much as it had some six or seven years ago, among the laurels in the garden, “what is it that troubles you?”

Even as he asked the question, his arm had somehow crept round her waist; he was drawing her near, nearer to himself, till her head rested on his breast.

Then she turned her pale face to meet his dark one.

“Nothing troubles me now,” she said softly.

“Judith, Judith!” he cried passionately—though he held her close and tight to his heart all the time—“do you know what you are doing? You are casting in your lot with one who has a miserable past to redeem, who, to the end of his life, will know nothing of ease or wealth, but will

be a toiler—and a good hard toiler, too—
‘outside the garden-wall.’”

And Judith, with her head still on his breast, answered in the sweet, solemn words of one of old time :

“ ‘Whither thou goest I will go ; where thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried.’ Naught but death shall part thee and me.”

And naught but death can part those two, so firmly clasped are their hands one in the other’s, as together they labour
“outside the garden-wall.”

Not among the gipsies and tramps now, but among a set of poor sinners who, at one time, formed part of Wolf’s East London parishioners. Every whit as lawless and squalid as gipsy or tramp are they, and as emphatically “outside the garden-wall” as any herd of Ishmaelites.

THE END.

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